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The First Step to Understanding Plato

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By Brian Proffitt

Wiley Publishing, Inc.

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1 Plato's Life

"I am that gadfly which God has given the state and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you."

—Socrates, *Apology*

Plato has been called, with no exaggeration, the Father of Western Philosophy. Though he hadn't aspired to such a role, he probably would not have shied away from it. (He was not known for his humility.) Like many other great figures in history, Plato came to play the role he did as much because of circumstance and chance as because of his own decisions.

What we know about Plato today, nearly 2,400 years after his death, stems mostly from his numerous writings (some 650,000 words have been attributed to his hand, according to Plato historian Christopher Planeaux). Through what he mentions in his work, and through biographies of Plato written by his contemporaries, we have produced a fairly good picture of what Plato's life was like.

But this picture, like most old images, has been blurred by time. Some of what we know of Plato stems from writings that tried to make him seem legendary in stature, so it is important to try to weed out some of the more grandiose descriptions of his background. Other information comes from his letters, the only written work from Plato where he actually mentions events in his life. Unfortunately, there is some dispute as to whether all the letters attributed to Plato were even written by him, placing their accuracy in question.

This book covers the information on Plato's life that is believed to be true by most scholars; alternative theories about Plato are mentioned for the sake of completeness, but not in great detail. (You can find more information on Plato and his life by consulting one of the references in the appendix at the end of this book.)

Plato's Early Life

There is some debate as to whether Plato was actually the philosopher's given name or a nickname that was generally accepted. It has been suggested by some, including Planeaux, that Plato's real name was Aristocles and that Plato was a nickname that loosely translates to "the broad." It isn't known whether *broad* refers to the width of his shoulders, the size of his forehead, or a description of his personality. Regardless, the name Plato seems to have stuck, at least with modern scholars.

A Silver Spoon

Most scholars believe that Plato was born in the year 427 B.C.E. in Athens, the third child of Ariston and Perictone. He had two older brothers and a younger sister. The family was one of the more wealthy in the Greek city-state of Athens, which had been democratically organized for just over 80 years when Plato was born. A city-state was a political organization in ancient Greece that tended to be geographically small areas dominated by a central metropolitan organization.

Some of the more legend-minded biographers and peers of Plato maintained that Plato descended from a long line of rulers that included Codrus, the last king of Athens. Whether this is true is a matter of debate. But it is generally well established that Plato's family was politically strong and active in Athenian society. In Plato's later years, these political connections would dramatically affect his life.

What influence Plato's father might have had on his third-born will unfortunately never be known, as Ariston died when Plato was very young. In keeping with Athenian tradition, which held that a woman could not head a household, Plato's mother soon remarried. From his mother's second marriage, Plato would get a half-brother.

Not much is known about Plato's early years. Like most Greek men of his time, he would have likely received the best education his family could afford. Given the political background of his family, he was very likely groomed for a life of politics and leadership.

Many biographers have pointed to evidence that Plato was skilled in the physical arts as well as the mental ones. Gifted with a strong body and athletic prowess, Plato won many wrestling contests, a sport that was among the most popular in Greece at the time. That he was so healthy and skilled in athletics is a testament to his family's financial status.

Although Plato's family was prosperous in Athens, they did not particularly enjoy the leadership under which they lived. Being wealthy and tracing (if somewhat ambiguously) their lineage back to ruling nobles, families like Plato's grew

increasingly discontent under the democratic rule of law. Apparently, what prosperity they had was not enough, and families like Plato's missed the past, when their families ruled over everything instead of just participating in government with other, less-noble people as equals. This attitude left quite an impression on the young Plato, whose political leanings would always remain opposed to the concept of democracy.

A Time of War

Just before the birth of Plato, Athens found itself embroiled in the midst of a rather bothersome war. If this description sounds nonchalant, it reflects the initial attitude the Athenians had toward the war and their enemy, the city-state of Sparta. The war between Athens and Sparta would have a profound impact on Plato's life.

Athens and Sparta had long been at odds with each other. The problem wasn't just that the city-states differed in their approaches, but that each city-state thought its methods would be best to rule over all of mainland Greece. Athens preferred a democratic approach to self-governance, while Sparta opted for a militaristic tyranny to rule itself. Although Sparta's expansionist army was generally greater than that of Athens, Sparta had been soundly beaten by Athens's massive navy and forced to sign a 30-year armistice.

Chafing under the enforced peace, Sparta, a very militaristic society, began to build up its armies for another try at Athens. In 431 B.C.E., four years before the birth of Plato, Sparta found its excuse in a small border skirmish and quickly set upon Athens with its large army. Athens resignedly set itself up for another confrontation with Sparta. Even though Sparta's army outnumbered Athens two to one, Athens had its own secret weapon: a very large navy, which Athens quickly used to bypass the land-based Spartans and attack Sparta directly.

Though each side felt that it would soon gain the upper hand, a stalemate arose between the two warring sides, as neither Athens nor Sparta could get a clear victory. Ultimately, the two city-states agreed to another armistice: the 50-year Peace of Nicias. Nicias was the ruling general of the Athenian forces at the time he helped craft this peace agreement, which basically allowed both sides to go home with nothing lost and nothing gained. He is described by his peers as a cautious and patient general, but he had rivals in the Athenian government who would soon cause him more trouble than Sparta ever did.

One of Nicias's rivals was Alcibiades, a very talented politician and orator. In 415 B.C.E., when Plato was 12 years old, Alcibiades whipped the Athenian Assembly, the ruling body of Athens, into an expansionist frenzy and convinced the leaders to send the army and navy to conquer the Greek city-states on the island of Sicily. Such a victory would have brought much wealth and power to the Athenian Empire had the plan worked.

Unfortunately, the army, still led by Nicias, was completely defeated, and half of the once-powerful Athenian navy was burned and sunk in the Syracuse harbor in 413 B.C.E. To make matters worse, Sparta took notice of the outcome. Worse still, the Persians, whom Athens also trounced in the first half of the fifth century B.C.E., decided to use the opportunity to take revenge on Athens.

Athens was attacked by two powerful and allied opponents: Sparta and Persia. With its military forces severely depleted, Athens fought a very good fight, fending off its allied enemies for a few years. But in 405 B.C.E., the remainder of the Athenian navy was defeated, which left the city-state up for grabs. One year later, Athens surrendered completely to Sparta.

For its part, Sparta did what most conquering powers would have done at that time: It tore down the walls of Athens, forbade Athens from ever having a navy again, and put its own puppet government in place, a group of 30 Athenians who would become known as the Thirty Tyrants. Among the Thirty Tyrants were Plato's uncle and great-uncle, who soon invited the 23-year-old Plato to participate in the new ruling government of the now-conquered Athens, an invitation he declined.

The Influence of Socrates

Determining how much influence Socrates the teacher had on Plato the student is difficult, particularly because most of the biographical knowledge we have about Socrates comes from Plato himself. This is mainly due to one very important difference in the approaches of Plato and Socrates: Plato typically wrote his important thoughts down, while Socrates thought writing a waste of time and instead followed a more oral tradition. It is important to recognize that without the diligence of Plato, the thoughts and teachings of Socrates would be forever lost.

Meeting Socrates

Exactly when Plato first met Socrates is a matter of conjecture by many historians. Most traditional views place their first meeting fairly early in Plato's life, when he was 20. Although this is certainly when Plato became Socrates's student, other historians have speculated that the pupil actually met his future teacher quite a bit earlier. This earlier meeting was likely to have occurred when Plato was a boy, as he was being groomed for the family "business" of Athenian politics. Socrates was a close associate of Plato's family, including his mother's brother Charmides and his mother's uncle Critas. Although Charmides and Critas participated in the Athenian democracy, they did so begrudgingly; they still longed for the earlier days when their family was one of the ruling families of Athens. Socrates, who was at best apathetic about the concept of democracy, provided philosophical fuel to Plato's kinsmen in

their quest to return to the good old days. Thus, it was likely that Plato met Socrates earlier in Plato's life, through one family function or another.

Before Plato became one of Socrates's students, Plato learned the way other upper-class Athenian men learned, becoming knowledgeable in the teachings of Cratylus, Pythagoras, and Parmenides—pre-Socratic philosophers who stretched Plato's knowledge of the universe with the concepts of metaphysics and *epistemology* (the study of the very nature of knowledge).

Aristotle, Plato's future student, later wrote that Plato was also an accomplished poet, his first major pursuit until he was the age of 20. At that time, Plato inexplicably decided to burn all his poems and devote his attention to philosophy.

Becoming Socrates's Student

When Plato was 20 years old (the age when he began to study with Socrates), Athens was still in its desperate struggle against the Spartan and Persian armies. Athens's final defeat was only three years away.

A tale passed on from this time indicates that Plato considered leaving home to become a mercenary soldier in the still ongoing war, and that Socrates talked him out of it and asked Plato to join him instead. This may be more fable than truth, but whatever the circumstances, Plato became one of Socrates's faithful students.

When Plato began to study under Socrates, he pursued his teacher's own quest for the substance and meaning of virtue. As Socrates engaged in dialogues with his students, the one overall theme was this quest for a noble character.

Plato, in an early display of the wisdom for which he is so renowned, was able to use his background education to apply the question of virtue to politics and morality. Plato reasoned that how we think and what we perceive as reality are important components to how we act. So, in the journey to a virtuous life, a person should always have a philosophical approach so he better molds himself with virtue. This would be a tenet that Plato would hold throughout the rest of his life, even after he grew past the teachings of Socrates and put forth his own unique ideas.

Plato was very good at unifying many different subjects—virtue, metaphysics, epistemology, and politics, for example—into a single question that he would then approach with methodical and careful reasoning. In fact, he was one of the first (if not the first) philosophers in Western culture to combine different disciplines to examine larger questions. But before he taught these ideas, Plato would first learn at the feet of Socrates and focus on the issue that beguiled Socrates until his death: the pursuit of the meaning of virtue.

Defending Socrates

After Athens was soundly defeated in 404 B.C.E., the Spartans and Persians divided their respective spoils, and then Sparta opted to set up the puppet government known as the Thirty Tyrants. The Tyrants (in those days, *tyrant* had the less-sinister meaning of "leader") were what is known as an *oligarchy,* a government made solely of a small faction of people. Sparta chose members of the conquered Athenian Assembly who would stay under the control of their Spartan masters and keep Athens from ever becoming a threat to Sparta again. Among the Thirty Tyrants were Plato's kinsmen Critas and Charmides, who invited Plato to actively participate in exerting their rule over the Athens puppet state.

Even though Plato was raised in an antidemocratic family and he himself tended to lean away from democracy, he resisted joining his family in ruling Athens. This was a surprising decision, because his great mentor, Socrates, was also a critic of the old Athenian government, believing that nobility could not be found in leadership by the masses. In fact, Socrates's teachings would be forever linked to the Thirty Tyrants, because they parroted his works in order to justify their actions.

Perhaps it was the Tyrants' actions that repelled Plato, for the Thirty certainly shaped the modern definition of the word *tyrant* with their violence and cruelty toward the conquered citizens of Athens. Even though Socrates had many negative beliefs about democratic government, he refused to actively involve himself in politics, preferring to stay out of such worldly affairs. Such neutrality may have influenced Plato to stay out as well.

After a mere eight months, the Thirty Tyrants were violently overthrown and replaced by a new democracy in 403 B.C.E. This new democracy, a far cry from the old government, was a far more conservative and religious group of men—and it was also a group that never forgot a grudge. After regaining power from the Thirty Tyrants, the new democracy craftily began to take their revenge on the members of that short-lived oligarchy and anyone who helped support the Tyrants. The new democracy had to be careful, however, to prevent any overt revenge from reawakening the ire of their Spartan masters. If this new democracy wanted to stay in power, they would have to continue to receive the tolerance of Sparta.

They found the perfect target in Socrates. Although Socrates had maintained all along that he didn't want to actively participate in political affairs (and indeed, he never did), the new government of Athens nonetheless saw him as the embodiment of all that was wrong with the Tyrants' rule. What gave the ruling power the excuse to finish Socrates once and for all was Socrates's continued insistence that his search for truth and virtue was motivated by a divine dream. This dream was a sign to him that he should continue to teach the young men of Athens a noble and virtuous lifestyle—a lifestyle that the Athenian government perceived as decidedly antidemocratic.

The government fed its own fears to the general public, who also remembered how Socrates was associated with the Thirty Tyrants, until there was a great public outcry to arrest Socrates and halt his teaching. In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was arrested and charged with corruption of youth, participating in odd religious practices, introducing new gods, and atheism (though how one could believe in new gods and still be an atheist is a point that seems to have been lost on the Athenian government).

Plato and the other students of Socrates immediately came to their teacher's defense, loudly and rightly defending their master in court and in the court of public opinion. Though Socrates and his students did their best, as documented in Plato's *Apology,* Socrates was found guilty by a narrow margin and put to death a month later. Plato visited his master often during this final month, but he did not attend the execution of Socrates.

This event and the abuses of the Tyrants were pivotal to Plato's decision to completely abandon the active pursuit of politics. Thus, Plato's path to a purely philosophical lifestyle was forever set. Disillusioned, Plato left Athens with his fellow students to seek the elusive truth in other lands and cultures.

Plato's Travels

Immediately after the execution of Socrates, Plato and his companions relocated to nearby Megara, where a small school of Socratic thought was established. During the next nine years (from 399 to 390 B.C.E.), Plato committed his first works to writing, a body of works that included *Laches, Protagoras,* and *Apology.* These works are collectively known as Plato's Socratic dialogues, because they are heavily focused on and influenced by his late teacher.

During this same period, it is speculated that Plato did a two-year stint (between 395 and 394 B.C.E.) with the military, possibly fighting in the Corinthian War, in which Athens and a collection of other city-states banded together to overthrow Spartan rule. It is not known for sure if he did indeed fight in this war, though there are some legends that he fought well enough to gain some decorations. During this time, Plato is also supposed to have journeyed to Egypt, where he visited Alexandria and possibly learned the secrets of the water clock, which he would bring back to Greek society. Again, this information is not well documented, so it may fall under the category of apocrypha.

What is known for sure is that Plato traveled to southern Italy for the first time in 390 B.C.E., at the age of 37. There he met Archytas of Tarentum, who was leading a resurgence in the study of the works of Pythagoras. This exposure to Pythagoreanism had very profound effects on Plato; it formed the foundation of the notion that mathematics was the truest way of expressing the universe that Man could use.

These ideas showed up in many of his later works, including *Republic,* as Plato used mathematical concepts to describe the nature of the universe and the human mind.

It was here in Sicily that Plato met Dion of Syracuse, the brother-in-law of Dionysius I, who ruled Sicily with an iron hand. Dion became Plato's student and close friend. Dionysius I, ever wary of Dion attempting to gain his throne, ultimately sent Plato away from Sicily in what appears to be a fit of resentment. Plato returned to his Athenian home and began the next phase of his life and writings.

The Opening of the Academy

Upon his return to Athens, Plato founded a new school on land a mile outside the city that was sacred to the old Greek hero Academus. The school, named after this hero and called the Academy, was founded in 387 B.C.E. and contained open land, a gymnasium, and several shrines, including one to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. Plato's goal for the Academy was to teach young men how to become enlightened in the ways of governing so that they would grow into philosopher-rulers or wise advisors to rulers.

Plato's Academy flourished, as men from all over the Athens region journeyed to hear and learn from him. Indeed, he began to obtain an almost cultic following, and it was in this time period that many divine motivations and rationales were attributed to Plato. It is unclear whether Plato himself encouraged such attributions, but he did make one thing clear to the ruling powers in Athens: He would not actively participate in Athenian politics. In fact, he repeatedly stated his cynical view that he had yet to see anything worthwhile in politics for him to deal with.

During this period, Plato produced his next phase of written works, what is known as his mature works. These works, including *Meno, Symposium,* and perhaps the greatest of all his works, *Republic,* focused on merging philosophic thoughts and ideals into the governance of men. If a true philosophical ruler could be in power, Plato believed, then that ruler would be fair, just, and strong by the very virtue of his abilities.

For the next 20 years, Plato continued to write and teach at his Academy, and it seemed that he would happily continue to do so for the rest of his life. History had one more role for Plato to play, however: a chance to finally apply his ideal government in the real world.

Plato's Return to Italy

In 367 B.C.E., Dionysius I died, leaving a young Dionysius II in charge of a fairly large kingdom. Dionysius II's uncle Dion, Plato's friend and student, persuaded the

boy king to send for Plato to properly advise and teach him the ways of being a good ruler. At the same time, Dion sent his old friend Plato a separate letter, trying to convince his mentor that here was his chance to put into practice the great ideas from his *Republic.* Now Plato could help realize the worthy goal of a philosopher-king.

Wary that such a young king would be difficult to teach, not to mention concerned by the presence of internal and external political turmoil in Sicily, Plato had little hope that such a plan would succeed. Still, Dion was his very good friend, and little hope was better than none. So Plato traveled to Syracuse to mold the young king, Dionysius II, before the influences of the court formed by the tyrannical Dionysius I got their hooks into the boy. Unfortunately, the plan was a disaster from almost the very beginning. The atmosphere of the king's court was highly charged with jealous courtiers who inherited the dead king's suspicions of Dion. Four months after Plato's arrival, Dion was charged with conspiracy and exiled.

The young Dionysius II was jealous of Plato's friendship with his uncle Dion. Dionysius continually tried to supplant himself into a similar relationship with Plato, thus replacing his uncle in Plato's affections. Dionysius II would not, however, fully commit himself to learning what Plato was trying to teach him. After two years, Plato decided to opt out of the situation, citing the fact that Sicily was now at war and the king would have no time to learn from him. Plato persuaded Dionysius II to let him return to Athens, promising the king that he would return to Sicily with Dion upon the conclusion of the war.

In 365 B.C.E., Plato, with his friend Dion, was back at the Academy and Plato seemed content that his active life in politics was finally at an end. Happily ensconced in this familiar environment, Plato spent the next four years teaching and writing. But in 361 B.C.E., Dionysius II had an apparent change of heart and strongly requested that Plato come back to Syracuse to resume his instruction. Plato initially refused, not believing the king's sincerity and also citing that the agreement was for Plato to come back with Dion, not alone.

Dionysius II surrounded himself with philosophers in his efforts to convince Plato that his intentions to learn were real. Among them was Archytas of Tarentum, for whom Plato still had much respect and affection. Archytas's promotion of Dionysius II, the fact that Dion was eventually granted permission to return, and Plato's Academy students' affectionate urging for their teacher to succeed in this endeavor finally convinced Plato in his decision to return to Sicily a third time.

If anything, this final trip to Syracuse was a worse disaster than the last journey. Plato believed that he would have to start afresh with Dionysius's teaching, which the king immediately rankled against. After all, the proud king reasoned, he had already had some instruction from Plato before, as well as from his collected group of court philosophers.

Meanwhile, Dionysius II cut off his uncle Dion from his lands and property. Dion was used to hold Plato hostage in the palace; every time Plato requested that he be allowed to leave, Dionysius would ask him to just wait another season, promising that doing so would help Dion's fortunes. Figuring he wasn't going to leave without Dionysius's permission anyway, Plato agreed to wait. The tyrannical king cut off Dion even more, by selling Dion's property. Luckily, Plato managed to get a message to Archytas, who visited with Dionysius and persuaded the king to let Plato return home.

Furious at Plato's treatment at the hands of his nephew, Dion began to raise support for a rebellion against the king, and he asked Plato to join him one last time. This time, Plato refused and stayed firm on his decision. He had had enough of politics and, besides, he was an old man and had no business fighting in a war. Plato returned to the Academy in 360 B.C.E. He was 67 years old.

The Final Years

Because not much was written by or about Plato in the remaining 13 years of his life, not much is known. There are some clues to his life after his return to Athens, however. Letters attributed to Plato indicate that, although he did not actively participate in Dion's attempt to oust Dionysius II, he still supported his friend and wrote to encourage him and find out how things were proceeding. (Dion's faction eventually took over, though Dion himself was assassinated in the coup.) Indeed, the Academy took an active advisory role in the Dionian government of Syracuse until 354 B.C.E., when the pupils of the Academy withdrew their support.

During this time, Plato wrote again—writings that are classified as part of his late period of works. His writing of this time has a distinctively introspective flair; Plato was trying to fine-tune his thoughts on government and philosophy with specialized works as *The Laws* and *Kritas.*

Certainly, Plato interacted with his greatest pupil, Aristotle, during these years, and passed on his knowledge and wisdom to his student as Socrates had done with Plato.

Plato died at the age of 80 in 347 B.C.E. His school continued until C.E. 529, when the Christian emperor Justinian closed it. The Academy's 916-year lifespan makes it the oldest learning institution in history.

Plato's influence is still strongly felt in Western culture and government, as his words began to ask the first important questions of who we are and how we can interact with one another.

2 Plato's Philosophy

"There is no such thing as a lovers' oath."
—Socrates, *Symposium*

Before examining some of Plato's more influential works, it is necessary to take a pause and examine some of the major ideas that he was trying to convey when he wrote them just under 2,400 years ago. Having reviewed the major highlights of his life in Chapter 1, it will be easier to see how the events of Plato's life had a hand in shaping the ideas that he created.

Plato's works are often organized into three major groups, based on specific periods and events in his life. This is not the only way Plato's works have been structured; scholars have tried to group his works into overarching themes. These themes are derived from various scholars' interpretations of Plato's works.

For simplistic purposes, however, this book focuses on the temporal organization of Plato's writings, because they mark not only different periods in his life, but also different motivations and understandings of the philosopher.

The Socratic Period

The first period of Plato's writings is usually referred to as the Socratic Period—for very obvious reasons.

Most scholars pinpoint this period of writing beginning in 399 B.C.E., shortly after the execution of Socrates by the ruling government of Athens. There is some debate as to whether Plato began writing slightly before Socrates's death, but it is certain that the bulk of his writing occurred after the death of his teacher and mentor.

The end of this period of writing is traditionally identified as the point when Plato traveled to southern Italy, in 390 B.C.E. There, he met the followers of Pythagoras and incorporated their worldview into his own.

The Meaning of Virtue

It is not too difficult to pick out one predominant theme of these early works: Plato, at least in these early writings, was not communicating anything of his own beliefs at this time—he was very carefully reproducing the ideas of his deceased teacher Socrates. This is the primary reason why this set of works is known as the Socratic dialogues. They are reflective of Socrates's mind, not Plato's.

That said, what was it that Socrates was trying to get across to his listeners that Plato felt was so important to transcribe for his readers? Socrates, through his divine vision, was very focused on examining the question of "What is Virtue?" Specifically, he narrowed his examination down to key elements that Socrates believed were essential to virtue, such as courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom.

Through Plato's dialogues, Socrates held conversations with various people, and within those conversations he sought to determine the answers to these monumental questions. He did not do it directly, however. Instead, Socrates would usually answer one question with another, to help his interlocutors figure out the answers for themselves. For example, when faced with a question such as "How can I be courageous?" Socrates would reply, "I really can't tell you—do you know what courage is?"

This method of questioning every assumption is traditionally known as the *Socratic method,* in honor of the man who utilized it so well. Actually, the technical name for this is the elenctic method, which means an indirect approach to a given proof.

The Socratic method works for just about every subject that can be taught, thought it adapts better to subjects where creative thought rather than facts and figures can be used. It is still used in schools and halls of learning today.

When Socrates employed it in these dialogues, he continued the cycle of question and reply over and over, all the while challenging the interlocutor's answers.

If someone gave him his personal definition of courage, Socrates would turn right around and point out that this definition was not consistent with other beliefs the interlocutor held. Thus, the interlocutor would be forced to refine his definition and provide another answer, which Socrates would again challenge, thus precipitating another re-definition.

All of this elenctic questioning was done in the hopes that an answer that both parties would agree upon would arise. In actuality, within Socrates's dialogues, the answer was never truly reached.

This was all right with Socrates, who never believed that the final answer would truly be attained. It was the process of questioning and dialogue that helped people to grow philosophically—not the declaration of a final "solution." This is the heart

of the reason why Socrates never wrote down any of his own dialogues: conversing actively was the only real way of getting closer to what was true.

Plato clearly did not buy into this argument, as the very presence of Socrates's dialogues in written form would suggest. Toward the end of this period of writing, Plato was starting to pull away from an exact repetition of Socrates's thoughts; he was beginning to insert his own critiques of Socrates's ideas within the dialogues.

After his return from Sicily, Plato found his own voice and built the reasons for his own ideas and contemplations.

Writings of the Socratic Period

Plato's devotion to the teachings of his master serves us well, because we get a first-hand glimpse into the mind of one of the world's greatest philosophers.

Eleven dialogues are attributed to this period:

- *Laches:* Also known as *Courage,* this dialogue allows Socrates to explore the concepts of courage versus cowardice.
- *Charmides:* Also known as *Temperance,* this work explores the Socratic concept of rationality using the virtue of temperance as a guide.
- *Euthyphro:* A brief dialogue that focuses on the virtue of holiness, this dialogue has Socrates posing as an ignorant student to expose the ignorance of a supposed master.
- *Lysis:* A somewhat unfocused dialogue, this work briefly examines notions of identity, harmony, and good and evil.
- *Protagoras:* A dialogue that examines a key question of Socrates: Can virtue be taught and, more importantly, can it be learned?
- *Hippias Minor:* The question of whether a truthful person and a liar are actually one and the same is examined in this dialogue.
- *Ion:* Plato relates Socrates investigating the differences between inspiration and knowledge, using a Homeric poet as an example.
- *Hippias Major:* This dialogue explores the meaning of what is beautiful. This work, it should be noted, has been questioned as an actual work of Plato, though tradition attributes it to him from this period.

- *Apology:* A critical dialogue on the trial and execution of Socrates. Apology derives from *apologia,* which is Greek for "defense," not "sorry."
- *Crito:* Socrates, through Plato, attempts to determine right and wrong through reason, rather than from outside influences, such as society.
- *Gorgias:* This dialogue queries the nature of justice and explores the implementation of power as a voyage to self-worth.

The Mature Period

After the return from his first voyage to Sicily and the formation of his Academy outside Athens, Plato settled into a comfortable life of teaching and writing that lasted for many years.

During this time, Plato began to pull away from the shadow of his teacher, in terms of topics and thought. But he did not leave the Socratic dialogue as a method of conveying his points. The dialogues were his only form of writing during his life.

The works from the Socratic period examine the ideas of Socrates—primarily the search for virtue. Although Plato never forgot the teachings of his mentor, he moved on to other explorations of the human mind, incorporating much of what he learned while abroad in Sicily.

Separating Form from Function

By the time he returned from Sicily and established his own Academy, Plato had been strongly influenced by the followers of Pythagoras he met in the distant country. His learning in the field of pure mathematics led him to examine the notions of certain universal constants in the universe.

Plato's line of thinking went something like this: Instead of virtue being something that was *in* a person—something that he possessed and somehow owned—virtue was instead a universal Form that existed whether someone exhibited it or not. These Forms, such as Justice, Virtue, Beauty, and Knowledge, were not treated as individual characteristics of human beings, but as Forms that existed in the universe regardless of the presence of humans. The examination of these Forms in this period is the basis for Plato's Theory of Forms.

It should be stated that nowhere in his writings did Plato say, "This is my Theory of Forms." This is an idea that later philosophers and historians named after picking out the common themes in these dialogues.

Plato examined other metaphysical concepts at this time in his life. In *Phaedo,* he took the idea of Forms and applied it to the human soul, which Plato argued was immortal, because it, too, was another Form.

Plato also employed this outlook on more mundane objects around him. He could look at a chair and say, "That is a chair." But he knew that someone else could say, "That is a stool" and be just as accurate, at least in the speaker's own point of view.

The imperfection of human language, Plato reasoned, could be bypassed by more-perfect mathematical representations of an object. Only a pure mathematical description of such objects would be true; any other description would be a mere reflection of the object.

If human characteristics such as justice and knowledge could be described as Forms, then these concepts could easily be applied to society as a whole. This line of reasoning is what led Plato down the path toward applying metaphysical concepts to government, which was, to Plato, ultimately responsible for guiding the society it ruled.

This idea culminated in his *Republic,* which is often regarded as Plato's greatest work. It begins with a Socratic conversation about the nature of justice, then moves on to a discussion on the virtues of justice, wisdom, courage, and temperance as they appear both in human beings and in society.

In his dialogues *Symposium* and *Phaedrus,* Plato also examined how the concept of romance and love works. These dialogues are referred to as erotic, though not in the modern sense of the word. Here, erotic refers to the concept of Eros, a term that is Greek for love.

To Plato, Love (another Form) was be the source of all that was good in the universe—the primary motivator for humans to come together and take care of one another. He thought that Eros also leads people to evil and tyranny if human resistance causes it to become diseased.

Plato was clearly at the height of his prowess during this time; he was taking on many issues and examining them against his metaphysical ideals. As he matured, he started to focus more and more on philosophy's role in government—a concept that led him back to Sicily two more times.

Writings of the Mature Period

The main thrust of these writings is the examination of various human and societal concepts with the use of metaphysical ideas rather than through more allegorical concepts. The following ten dialogues are attributed to this period:

- *Meno:* In this work, Plato uses mathematical ideas to explore the question "What is Virtue?"
- *Cratylus:* Although some argue this dialogue represents the debate between conventionalism and naturalism in the theory of meaning, others have argued that this work represents an attack on the use of *etymology* (the study of the history of words) in philosophy.
- *Euthydemus:* A look at what constitutes philosophy is the central theme of this dialogue.
- *Menexenus:* Another work whose authorship is in doubt, Plato's student Aristotle attributes this rhetorical examination of patriotism to his teacher.
- *Symposium:* Plato explores the inner workings of romance and love in this work.
- *Phaedo:* A look at the connection between death, life, and philosophy as Plato writes a eulogy for Socrates.
- *Republic:* Regarded as the greatest work of Plato, it represents Plato's search for the meaning of Justice and how a society should be governed.
- *Phaedrus:* An erotic dialogue much like the *Symposium,* this work advances the idea that life without the search for self-knowledge is not worth living.
- *Parmenides:* This work has much discussion surrounding it, because its themes are not implicitly clear. Plato does give much examination to his own Theory of Forms.
- *Theatetus:* Plato examines the question "What is Knowledge?" in this dialogue.

The Late Period

After Plato returned from Sicily on his second and third visits, he began another period of writing that lasted for the rest of his life.

In this, the late period of his life, Plato became more and more introspective about his prior works, trying to expound on them and fine-tune them to meet his most overriding goal: the literal application of his ideal government of the philosopher-king.

This mission was the impetus for the next two trips Plato would take to the Sicilian city of Syracuse, as he strove to teach the young Dionysius II how to properly apply philosophical thought to the rule of men. This mission ultimately failed, but

Plato still used his themes of form and idea and built upon the ideals first presented in such works as his *Republic.*

Continuing the Conversation

A novice might look at the writings of this period as a form of second-guessing upon the part of Plato, because he seems to take a step back and start critically examining everything he ever said. This analysis would be incomplete, of course. Though Plato had grown beyond his master's teachings, like Socrates he was still practicing the elenctic method, though on a much grander scale.

For Plato, no idea he or anyone else could come up with would be the Final Answer, so self-examination was crucial to the refinement of his ideas expressed during his lifetime.

This then, marked the central thrust of Plato's mature period: a refinement of his earlier ideas, primarily focused on his efforts in applying philosophy to governing societies.

He also developed the idea that knowledge of things could be defined by two stages: collection and division. First, he argued, general knowledge about a thing (a set of animals, for example) can be collected, and then the specifics about the individual animals can be divided into smaller and less-broad categories: mammals over here, reptiles over there; then mammals into primates, ruminates, marsupials, and so on.

This concept of division of knowledge into smaller, discrete categories is something that is practiced a great deal in modern times, and it is a central tenet of most scientific classifications. But it is not something a lot of people agree with. Plato's own student Aristotle challenged this notion of division in his *Parts of Animals.*

This example of division is reflective of what Plato was trying to achieve in all the works in this part of his life: the real application of his metaphysical concepts to everyday life. To Plato, this was the important thing, and he tended to focus on the higher-priority issues, which, for him, centered around the governance of society.

Ultimately, Plato's work on this theme remained unfinished, leaving his students and the rest of us to continue the conversations as they move ever closer to the final answer.

Writings of the Mature Period

The first dialogues Plato wrote in this period were actually in between his second and third trips to Sicily, after he left that country in disappointment, having failed in his attempts to teach Dionysius. Plato remained at the Academy for about four years and used this time to teach and produce two dialogues.

- *Sophistes:* This dialogue examines the concept of falsity and nonbeing.
- *Politicus:* Also known as *The Statesman,* this work describes the perfect leader as one who is the personification of the Rule of Life.

After his final return from Sicilian political intrigues, Plato settled down at the Academy for the remainder of his life. In this period, he continued to use the Socratic framework for his dialogues, but now in such a way that the ideas expressed in his works could be easily drawn upon and applied to practical life—particularly government. Works that he wrote during this period are the following:

- *Philebus:* Advocacy of intellectual activity over physical pleasure is the theme of this work.
- *Timaeus:* Plato uses the most up-to-date concepts of metaphysics to examine the origins of the universe and relate them to the political structure of Mankind.
- *Critias:* A companion to *Timaeus,* Plato continues tying the forces of Nature to the conflicts of Man, using fabled Atlantis as an example.
- *The Laws:* Plato's longest work, which remained unfinished at his death, this work attempted to codify, once and for all, the blueprints for a perfectly governed society.

Other Works

As seen in the prior summaries, some works attributed to Plato are disputed, because they don't quite seem to match what scholars believe Plato would be thinking. As Plato defined the works of his teacher Socrates, so too would Plato's student Aristotle help to define Plato's works. Some dialogues are attributed to Plato based solely on the word and writings of Aristotle, which, for many, is good enough.

There are other works, of course, of which we are not so sure. There are seven letters that Plato reportedly wrote to various companions during his life. These letters, which were written in a more narrative style, are some of the main sources we have of Plato's life. Not all the letters are classified as genuine, though *Letter 7* is often held as a valid source of this biographical information.

Plato's works, which have remained important to this day, have helped to shape, positively or negatively, the workings of philosophy and government for thousands of years. In the next chapters of this book, three of his most important works are examined in greater detail: *Apology, Meno,* and *Republic.*

3 Apology

"Not much time will be gained, O Athenians, in return for the evil name which you will get from the detractors of the city, who will say that you killed Socrates, a wise man. . . ."

—Socrates, *Apology*

It is with no small irony that the greatest of Plato's works is actually a recollection of the words of his teacher and mentor Socrates. This chapter examines the reasons why Plato wrote *Apology* and how it gives the most intimate portrait of one of the world's greatest philosophers.

Perspective on Apology

In a collection of Plato's work, *Apology* is typically the first dialogue found. It is, without doubt, one of the most well-known works of Plato, even though it's really the only work that reveals nothing of Plato's thoughts. *Apology* is, in many respects, the only true Socratic dialogue in existence. Although Plato uses dialogue as a framework for all his works, and even uses Socrates as a character in many of his works, this is the only work that truly reflects the words of Socrates.

There are only two works that detail the events at the trial of Socrates in 399 B.C.E.: *Apology,* of course, and Xenophon's *Memorabilia.* Xenophon was an acquaintance of Socrates who wanted to put something on record about his friend's trial. Unfortunately, Xenophon, by his own admission, was not actually at the trial, so the record he leaves us is at best incomplete.

Plato, however, was at the trial—something Socrates himself confirms in the dialogue. And as a student of Socrates, Plato endeavored to keep as close to an accurate account as possible. The circumstances that brought Socrates to this fateful event (detailed in Chapter 1 of this book), are full of intrigue that we can clearly recognize 2,400 years later.

After the overthrow of the puppet government, known as the Thirty Tyrants, in 403 B.C.E., the new Athenian Assembly clearly had an axe to grind on the indignities suffered at the hands of the Tyrants and their masters, the Spartans. Care had to be taken, however, because the Spartans were still officially in charge of the conquered Athenians; too much rebellion would break the tolerance of Sparta and lead to harsh punishments for Athens. So, any revenge that Athens's new government would be able to take on the former dictators would have to be carefully measured.

It also didn't help that Socrates's ideal of virtue centered around a noble's lifestyle—something that did not sit well with a democratic body. They well remembered Socrates's association with the Thirty Tyrants, too. Socrates would become the victim of an unfortunate association. Though he adamantly refused to be actively involved in any politics, his teachings and words were apparently antidemocratic enough to warrant a sort of social adoption by the Thirty. In other words, they liked his stuff and used it to justify some of their actions.

Socrates's ongoing teaching of the young men of Athens about the meaning of virtue was not a problem for the ruling party, because this was a practice undertaken by many teachers in Athens—a class of educators known as Sophists. But although Sophists generally taught as their livelihood, Socrates disdained such motives and strove to teach young Athenian men based on divine visions that told him such work was holy and just.

These visions, which Socrates proclaimed came directly from the goddess Athena, were used as his carte blanche justification to relentlessly query the Athenian gentry. But Socrates would soon anger too many citizens for a divine rationale to protect him.

That, ultimately, was the last straw. The most conservative members of the Assembly were also very religious and saw anyone who had divine messages outside of the worship of Athena and the rest of the pantheon of Greek gods as a moral outrage. Led by Meletus, who was assisted by Anytus and Lycon, a movement soon swept the ruling class of Athens to call for a halt to Socrates's activities.

This faction of the Assembly also fed their own fears to the general public, who remembered how Socrates was associated with the Thirty, until finally there was an outcry to arrest Socrates. In 399 B.C.E., Socrates was arrested and charged with a contradictory set of offenses: corruption of youth, participating in odd religious practices, introducing new gods, and atheism.

The Athenian system of justice, if it can be called that, was an odd mixture of vigilantism and civil proceedings. Basically, if someone was charged with a crime, he would be tried before a jury of Athenian men. There was no judge per se, only representatives of a tribunal/ruling committee of the Assembly, known as the Archons. There were nine Archons, six of whom functioned as judges and three of

whom rotated as the role of King on an annual basis. When one of these three held the position of King, his duties were actually rather limited—his primary responsibilities were as religious functionaries, keeping up with the religious duties held by the kings of old.

When a trial was held, it was presided over by one of these Archons. Because Socrates was charged with religious crimes, his trial was held in the court of King Archon. The government did not provide prosecutors. Charges were only made by private citizens if they actually cared that someone did something wrong. (To prevent abuse of the system, if an indicted person was found not guilty, his accuser would be forced to pay 1,000 drachmas in damages.) Juries were not selected by the government; the members of the jury, all men of age, would simply show up for any given trial. Tradition holds that 501 jurors showed up for Socrates's trial.

Because he brought the charges, Meletus would be responsible for prosecuting Socrates. Socrates's students came to the trial to defend their teacher, but according to Xenophon's account, they were shouted down by the jurors, who apparently only wanted to hear from Socrates. And thus, we have Socrates standing before 501 jurors, his accusers, and a figurehead judge in a free-for-all debate where his life hung in the balance. Socrates did not appear to be intimidated by all this; the first words out of his mouth to the jury positively reeked of sarcasm and irony.

Opening Statements, Cross Exam, and Closing Arguments

From what we can glean from *Apology,* Socrates did not seem to be the kind of person who suffered fools gladly. Indeed, from his opening statement to the jury, it appears he was bothered by the whole notion of this trial; his first words are insulting to the whole gathering:

> How you have felt, O men of Athens, at hearing the speeches of my accusers, I cannot tell; but I know that their persuasive words almost made me forget who I was—such was the effect of them; and yet they have hardly spoken a word of truth.

Socrates is sarcastically feigning confusion, having been "dazzled" by the brilliant arguments of the prosecution up to this moment. This first statement sets the tone for almost the entirety of Socrates's statements in *Apology:* He does not want to acknowledge any valid purpose for this trial, nor will he acknowledge the seriousness of it.

This makes sense, because Socrates has two strong reasons for not believing in the validity of this trial. First, to him, this is a politically motivated event and, all

throughout his teachings, Socrates has repeatedly declared himself above and beyond such matters. Second, his motivation for exploring the meaning of virtue amongst the men of Athens was divinely inspired—such a message likely made him fall immune to the concerns of his fellow man.

Of course, Socrates is not completely removed from these proceedings. At the very end of this passage, he fires off a direct rebuttal at his accusers—essentially calling them liars. Socrates goes on to further comment on another accusation: the prosecutors have already told the jury to be wary of Socrates's eloquence, lest they be persuaded away from the "truth." Socrates scoffs at this notion by making a self-effacing comment:

> They ought to have been ashamed of saying this, because they were sure to be detected as soon as I opened my lips and displayed my deficiency; they certainly did appear to be most shameless in saying this, unless by the force of eloquence they mean the force of truth; for then I do indeed admit that I am eloquent.

Again, mockingly, Socrates is attempting to lay low his accusers' assertions that he could talk his way out of anything. Socrates tells the jury that he merely relies on the truth to do his talking for him. Indeed, Socrates goes on to state that much of what he is about to say is about to be made up on the spot. Xenophon, the historian who also recorded Socrates's trial, confirms that Socrates went to the trial unprepared.

So why is Plato's version so eloquently done? Some scholars have speculated that Plato was writing Socrates as Plato would have said it. Socrates no doubt said the things attributed to him in *Apology,* but it is possible that Plato may have cleaned up the language a bit. This is a common transcriber's device. Even modern journalists tend to eliminate *um*s and *er*s from an interviewee's speech as they write down a quoted statement.

Socrates seems intent on setting the ground rules for this legal confrontation. He has stated that his accusers are liars, that his speech is only as eloquent as the truth behind it, and that he will be making an unprepared defense statement. He then concludes this rule-setting phase with a statement that the jury will have to tolerate that he will be speaking to them in *his* accustomed manner, not theirs. Socrates claims ignorance at legal proceedings as his reason for this, but this is Socrates jockeying for conversational position, pure and simple.

After he gets his opening remarks out of the way, Socrates begins to examine the charges laid against him. He indicates that he is going to divide the charges up into two major subsets. The first will comprise old accusations and innuendo—all the events that have led him to receive a poor reputation. After he dispels these notions, Socrates will then move on to the actual charges brought up against him at this particular trial.

Guilt by Reputation

A majority of Socrates's defense statement is taken up with the analysis and critique of the various factors that Socrates believes portrayed him in a bad way to the Athenian rulers and citizens. Clearly, he feels that by breaking down these old rumors and misunderstandings and disproving them one by one, he will start to remove credibility from the prosecutors' current arguments. This is a fairly strong strategy, especially since Socrates will interweave the charges of the present-day trial in with the explanations of why he thinks this all came about.

Socrates recognizes that much of his bad reputation has been with him for a very long time—indeed, since some of the jury at the trial were children. Socrates asserts that he has attained the reputation of being an atheist, a paid teacher of philosophers (known as a Sophist), and a common philosopher. This latter assertion may seem an odd label to duck. After all, Socrates was a philosopher, at least by our standards. Actually, what Socrates was trying to avoid was being lumped in with the philosophers of his day, those "who speculated about the heaven above, and searched into the earth beneath, and made the worse appear the better cause." These men of thought, from whom Socrates strongly disassociated himself, were natural philosophers who tried to deduce the nature of the universe. From our perspective, these philosophers are known as pre-Socratic.

Pre-Socratic philosophers tended to apply their theories about the universe whenever they could. To Socrates (and indeed, the ruling powers of Athens), at best these philosophers were amusing hucksters trying to find gold in lead. At worst, they were heretics to be executed. So, in terms of principle and practicality, Socrates was right in separating himself from this group.

Pre-Socratic philosophers, at least the more popular ones, were also commonly employed as teachers of young men called Sophists, using their knowledge to teach through rhetoric and persuasion. Sophists were generally regarded with respect, because they performed a needed function in Athenian society. But the basis of one of the charges against Socrates was that he exerted undue influence on the youth of Athens—something that, if he were a Sophist, would be easy to do.

Socrates emphatically denied being a natural philosopher or a Sophist. He did so by reminding those in the jury to recall how he conversed with people in the past. If they did, they would remember that Socrates never used persuasive methods to get his points across. He always asked questions, and that's all he did. Never were any of these questions regarding natural phenomena, nor did they try to lead into some sort of political agenda. To Socrates, they were questions that were a means to an end, not the end itself.

Besides being misrepresented as a teacher, Socrates was also catching a bad reputation from a play written by contemporary playwright Aristophanes called

The Clouds. In *The Clouds* is a character named Socrates, who is depicted as floating up in the clouds with all the other nonsensical philosophers. Several historians have conjectured that Aristophanes meant no evil by this good-natured jibe, and that Socrates himself may have even thought it was humorous. But by the time of his trial, clearly Socrates thought what was once a funny send-up had actually become a part of the social perception of how he really behaved: running about spouting nonsense to anyone who would listen.

Socrates brings up the play and immediately rejects the notion of being anything like this character. He also starts sharing his opinion of contemporary Sophists:

> As little foundation is there for the report that I am a teacher, and take money; that is no more true than the other. Although, if a man is able to teach, I honor him for being paid. There is Gorgias of Leontium, and Prodicus of Ceos, and Hippias of Elis, who go the round of the cities, and are able to persuade the young men to leave their own citizens, by whom they might be taught for nothing, and come to them, whom they not only pay, but are thankful if they may be allowed to pay them.

At first glance, this seems a praise for the Sophists, but from Socrates it is actually thinly veiled sarcasm, because he thinks this whole practice is rather silly. To demonstrate this, he relates a tale that compares such teachers of young men to breeders of animals.

> I met a man who has spent a world of money on the Sophists, Callias the son of Hipponicus, and knowing that he had sons, I asked him: "Callias," I said, "if your two sons were foals or calves, there would be no difficulty in finding someone to put over them; we should hire a trainer of horses or a farmer probably who would improve and perfect them in their own proper virtue and excellence; but as they are human beings, whom are you thinking of placing over them? Is there anyone who understands human and political virtue? You must have thought about this as you have sons; is there anyone?"

There is a key question in this passage that reveals what Socrates thinks about Sophists and philosophers: "Is there anyone who understands human and political virtue?" The unspoken answer, at least from Socrates's point of view, is that there isn't anyone he's discovered yet.

Having established to his satisfaction sufficient proof that he is not a Sophist, nor a natural philosopher, Socrates now, finally, turns to explaining just exactly what he is and what he has been doing. After first warning the audience that what he has to say will be somewhat unsettling, he launches into what has been described as the core defense of *Apology:*

> Men of Athens, this reputation of mine has come of a certain sort of wisdom which I possess. If you ask me what kind of wisdom, I reply, such wisdom as is attainable by man, for to that extent I am inclined to believe that I am wise; whereas the persons of whom I was speaking have a superhuman wisdom, which I may fail to describe, because I have it not myself; and he who says that I have, speaks falsely, and is taking away my character. And here, O men of Athens, I must beg you not to interrupt me, even if I seem to say something extravagant. For the word which I will speak is not mine. I will refer you to a witness who is worthy of credit, and will tell you about my wisdom—whether I have any, and of what sort—and that witness shall be the god of Delphi.

Examining this passage in sections will reveal the heart of Socrates's justification. Initially, Socrates describes a "certain sort of wisdom" that he possesses. It should be noted that he does not describe it as human wisdom. He then goes on to say that the wisdom he possesses is only that which can be achieved by a human being, and no more.

Socrates believes that the wisdom of the Sophists and philosophers he was just referring to is "superhuman"—but this is not necessarily a compliment. Scholars of Socrates believe that in the original Greek, Socrates actually meant that the Sophists, if they were truly wise, would have had to have been more than human. Because, in Socrates's worldview, true wisdom cannot come from the mind of man—and Socrates emphatically denies that the wisdom he possesses comes from himself.

After settling down the jury one more time (one wonders just how upset and raucous the atmosphere of the trial was at this point, that Plato felt is necessary to include such admonitions in the Socratic dialogue), Socrates reveals the real source for his wisdom, and the best witness for his defense: the god of Delphi, known to most English speakers as Apollo, the Greek god of the sun.

Throughout *Apology,* Socrates refers to god, or his god, and it should be noted that this god is indeed Apollo, not the monotheistic God of the Judaic, Christian, or Muslim faiths. Apollo was not any more important than any of the other gods of the Greek pantheon, but he was the patron god of Delphi, a very sacred place in Greek culture. It was at Delphi that the Oracle resided—a high priestess who would be possessed by Apollo and speak wisdom to any petitioners who approached the Oracle with sufficient penitence and offering. By directly referring to Apollo in this manner, Socrates is giving his statement a lot of weight, since Delphi's prominence in Greek culture was second only to that of Olympia's. He is also foreshadowing the rest of his tale, because the Oracle will be a prominent character in why he has taken on the role of inquisitor.

Socrates goes on to relate the tale of an old friend, Chaerephon, now deceased, who once went to the Oracle and asked if there was anyone wiser than Socrates. The

Oracle, overcome in the trance of Apollo, replied to Chaerephon "that there was no man wiser." When Socrates was told this by Chaerephon, he was not exactly comfortable with the answer, since Socrates always maintained that he never held any wisdom of any sort.

> When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of this riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After a long consideration, I at last thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest."

So, in an effort to prove the god of the Oracle wrong, Socrates decided to go out and seek the wisest men in Athenian society and determine, through his typical method of questioning, if there was indeed anyone who was wiser than he. Unfortunately, Socrates would repeatedly find when he spoke to politicians and other learned men, that they were no wiser than he was and, to a man, they were all less wise than Socrates himself. And, to Socrates's rather naïve shock, these powerful men were not too happy at being proved to be less wise than anyone else. He found this to be true not only of the politicians and teachers but also of the artisans and poets he questioned.

So, he admits to the jury, in the process of confirming what seems to be a divine message from the gods, that he is forced to be in the position of creating enemies out of a lot of well-connected men in Athens. This, he argues, is a big source of the bad reputation that has hung over him for so long—the enmity of the so-called wise men he called out through his years of questioning. Socrates lays this out in a closing statement on the "old" accusations:

> This investigation has led to my having many enemies of the worst and most dangerous kind, and has given occasion also to many calumnies, and I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise; and in this oracle he means to say that the wisdom of men is little or nothing; he is not speaking of Socrates, he is only using my name as an illustration, as if he said, He, O men, is the wisest, who, like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing.

Basically, Socrates is saying that, although he could never prove the Oracle wrong, he came to the conclusion that no man is wiser than any other man. Apollo, through his priestess, was only using Socrates as an example of someone who is wise when

he admits he knows nothing. Socrates believes this is the primary reason why his present-day accusers have come to him with these new charges. All three of them—Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon—represent some faction of society that Socrates has found "lacking" in wisdom during his search for it. With this foundation laid before the jury, Socrates now turns his attention to the second set of charges: the actual indictments brought to this trial.

Taking on the Accusers

When Socrates addresses the charges currently brought forth by his accusers, he opts to take on the accusers themselves in a direct cross-examination of Meletus, whom Socrates targets as the originator of this current evil against him.

First off, in what seems to be a pattern with Socrates, he mockingly opens the exchange with a recap of the charges currently leveled against him:

> I have said enough in my defense against the first class of my accusers; I turn to the second class, who are headed by Meletus, that good and patriotic man, as he calls himself. And now I will try to defend myself against them: these new accusers must also have their affidavit read.
>
> What do they say? Something of this sort: That Socrates is a doer of evil, and corrupter of the youth, and he does not believe in the gods of the state, and has other new divinities of his own. That is the sort of charge; and now let us examine the particular counts.

Referring to Meletus as a "good and patriotic man" is unmitigated sarcasm, because Socrates quickly adds that this is an epithet that Meletus himself uses, not Socrates. Clearly Socrates is still upset that he should be bothered with any of this, and he takes every chance he can to sting his accusers with such sarcasm.

Socrates then goes on to read the charges as he interprets them, the first of which is that he is a "doer of evil, and corrupter of the youth." Having already examined these points in the first part of his defense, Socrates decides to elaborate on them further in a direct confrontation with Meletus, first challenging Meletus's assertion that he is a corrupting influence on the youth of Athens:

> [Socrates] He says that I am a doer of evil, who corrupt the youth; but I say, O men of Athens, that Meletus is a doer of evil, and the evil is that he makes a joke of a serious matter, and is too ready at bringing other men to trial from a pretended zeal and interest about matters in which he really never had the smallest interest. And the truth of this I will endeavor to prove. Come hither, Meletus, and let me ask a question of you. You think a great deal about the improvement of youth?

[Meletus] Yes, I do.

[Socrates] Tell the judges, then, who is their improver; for you must know, as you have taken the pains to discover their corrupter, and are citing and accusing me before them. Speak, then, and tell the judges who their improver is. Observe, Meletus, that you are silent, and have nothing to say. But is not this rather disgraceful, and a very considerable proof of what I was saying, that you have no interest in the matter? Speak up, friend, and tell us who their improver is.

[Meletus] The laws.

[Socrates] But that, my good sir, is not my meaning. I want to know who the person is, who, in the first place, knows the laws.

[Meletus] The judges, Socrates, who are present in court.

[Socrates] What do you mean to say, Meletus, that they are able to instruct and improve youth?

[Meletus] Certainly they are.

[Socrates] What, all of them, or some only and not others?

[Meletus] All of them.

[Socrates] By the goddess [Hera], that is good news! There are plenty of improvers, then. And what do you say of the audience, do they improve them?

[Meletus] Yes, they do.

[Socrates] And the senators?

[Meletus] Yes, the senators improve them.

[Socrates] But perhaps the members of the citizen assembly corrupt them? —or do they too improve them?

[Meletus] They improve them.

[Socrates] Then every Athenian improves and elevates them; all with the exception of myself; and I alone am their corrupter? Is that what you affirm?

[Meletus] That is what I stoutly affirm.

[Socrates] I am very unfortunate if that is true. But suppose I ask you a question: Would you say that this also holds true in the case of horses? Does one man do them harm and all the world good? Is not the exact opposite of this true? One man is able to do them good, or at least not many; —the trainer of horses, that is to say, does them good, and others who have to do with them rather injure them? Is not that true, Meletus, of horses, or any other animals?

[Meletus] Yes, certainly.

[Socrates] Whether you and Anytus say yes or no, that is no matter. Happy indeed would be the condition of youth if they had one corrupter only, and all the rest of the world were their improvers. And you, Meletus, have sufficiently shown that you never had a thought about the young: your carelessness is seen in your not caring about matters spoken of in this very indictment.

In this exchange, which is fairly straightforward, Socrates backs Meletus into a corner when he questions him on who in Athens is an improver of youth, since Meletus is such an expert on who is a corrupting influence. Unwilling to lay any accusations on other members of Athenian society, Meletus falls into the trap and blithely adds all the members of Athens's citizenry to the list of improvers of youth.

Once he gets Meletus to make the rather sweeping assertion that only Socrates, in all of Athens, is a corrupting influence on Athens's youth, Socrates uses the analogy of the horse trainer to drive home his point. Not everyone, Socrates states, can be a horse trainer—just a select few with the right expertise. So making the statement that all of Athenian society was a positive influence on the youth of the city-state runs very counter to this commonly observed phenomenon.

Essentially, Socrates catches Meletus in a lie, because the accuser really doesn't know who represents the real improvers of youth in Athens. He reveals that he does not know and only seems to care about convicting Socrates. At this point, if Meletus had been on his toes, he might have noted the fact that Socrates answered his own question ("Whether you and Anytus say yes or no, that is no matter"), which is inconsistent with Socrates's statements that his only mission is to ask questions on behalf of Apollo. But Socrates has already moved on to his next set of questions—whether he was willingly corrupting anyone at all:

[Socrates] And now, Meletus, I must ask you another question: Which is better, to live among bad citizens, or among good ones? Answer, friend, I say; for that is a question which may be easily answered. Do not the good do their neighbors good, and the bad do them evil?

[Meletus] Certainly.

[Socrates] And is there anyone who would rather be injured than benefited by those who live with him? Answer, my good friend; the law requires you to answer—does anyone like to be injured?

[Meletus] Certainly not.

[Socrates] And when you accuse me of corrupting and deteriorating the youth, do you allege that I corrupt them intentionally or unintentionally?

> [Meletus] Intentionally, I say.
>
> [Socrates] But you have just admitted that the good do their neighbors good, and the evil do them evil. Now is that a truth which your superior wisdom has recognized thus early in life, and am I, at my age, in such darkness and ignorance as not to know that if a man with whom I have to live is corrupted by me, I am very likely to be harmed by him, and yet I corrupt him, and intentionally, too; —that is what you are saying, and of that you will never persuade me or any other human being. But either I do not corrupt them, or I corrupt them unintentionally, so that on either view of the case you lie. If my offense is unintentional, the law has no cognizance of unintentional offences: you ought to have taken me privately, and warned and admonished me; for if I had been better advised, I should have left off doing what I only did unintentionally—no doubt I should; whereas you hated to converse with me or teach me, but you indicted me in this court, which is a place not of instruction, but of punishment.
>
> I have shown, Athenians, as I was saying, that Meletus has no care at all, great or small, about the matter.

This exchange contains a core piece of Socrates's philosophy regarding what is right and what is wrong, a weapon he uses against Meletus that perhaps goes over the head of his accuser and even the jury surrounding him.

Socrates firmly believes that no one can intentionally do any wrong. In his view, when someone performs an action, they are always doing good—at least for them. If a man helps a stranger, he is doing good (and both he and the stranger believe so). If a man kills a stranger then, while the stranger might argue otherwise, he is still doing good, from his standpoint. This is a rather amoral sounding argument, which Socrates uses in other dialogues. Essentially Socrates believes that no one is really wise enough to know what is truly good or evil, so to have someone apply that label to him is ludicrous.

So, Socrates takes this line of questioning to Meletus, getting him to first admit that good people do good things and evil people do evil things, then admit that no one would ever desire to be hurt intentionally. If both of these suppositions are true, Socrates asserts, then why would he, Socrates, ever knowingly corrupt the young? If he did, then sooner or later these corrupted youth were going to turn around and harm him someday.

With that line of thought, Socrates continues to say that either he is not corrupting the young or he is doing so accidentally. If the former is true, then obviously there is no need for this trial. If the latter is the case, then Socrates reasons that he should have been taken aside by Meletus and his fellow accusers and informed of the tragic mistake he was making instead of hauled into court. (In Athenian law, ignorance of the law was a valid defense.)

Socrates actually uses this argument to accuse Meletus of neglecting his responsibility to the youth of Athens and point out to the jury once again that Meletus really does not care about the Athenian youth—he's just out to condemn Socrates. After making this point, Socrates shifts arguments to another of the charges: that he is accused of teaching about false gods not worshipped by the citizens of Athens. Initially, Socrates interrogates Meletus on the exact nature of the charges against him.

> [Socrates] But still I should like to know, Meletus, in what I am affirmed to corrupt the young. I suppose you mean, as I infer from your indictment, that I teach them not to acknowledge the gods which the state acknowledges, but some other new divinities or spiritual agencies in their stead. These are the lessons which corrupt the youth, as you say.
>
> [Meletus] Yes, that I say emphatically.
>
> [Socrates] Then, by the gods, Meletus, of whom we are speaking, tell me and the court, in somewhat plainer terms, what you mean! [F]or I do not as yet understand whether you affirm that I teach others to acknowledge some gods, and therefore do believe in gods and am not an entire atheist—this you do not lay to my charge; but only that they are not the same gods which the city recognizes—the charge is that they are different gods. Or, do you mean to say that I am an atheist simply, and a teacher of atheism?
>
> [Meletus] I mean the latter—that you are a complete atheist.
>
> [Socrates] That is an extraordinary statement, Meletus. Why do you say that? Do you mean that I do not believe in the godhead of the sun or moon, which is the common creed of all men?
>
> [Meletus] I assure you, judges, that he does not believe in them; for he says that the sun is stone, and the moon earth.

This last accusation from Meletus implies that Socrates is no different than any other natural philosopher living during those times. In their varied views of the universe, this is certainly a statement that could apply to them. Socrates has already disassociated himself from the pre-Socratic thinkers earlier in his testimony, and he will continue to do so by arguing that statements Meletus attributes to Socrates are actually coming from the philosopher Anaxagoras:

> [Socrates] Friend Meletus, you think that you are accusing Anaxagoras; and you have but a bad opinion of the judges, if you fancy them ignorant to such a degree as not to know that those doctrines are found in the books of Anaxagoras the Clazomenian, who is full of them. And these are the doctrines which the youth are said to learn of Socrates, when there are not infrequently exhibitions of them

> at the theatre (price of admission one drachma at the most); and they might cheaply purchase them, and laugh at Socrates if he pretends to father such eccentricities. And so, Meletus, you really think that I do not believe in any god?
>
> [Meletus] I swear by Zeus that you believe absolutely in none at all.

Now Socrates pounces on Meletus's contradictory statements: How can Socrates be a teacher of false gods and an atheist at the same time? Socrates, scoffing at Meletus's inconsistencies, now hammers his accuser with a barrage of questions:

> [Socrates] You are a liar, Meletus, not believed even by yourself. For I cannot help thinking, O men of Athens, that Meletus is reckless and impudent, and that he has written this indictment in a spirit of mere wantonness and youthful bravado. Has he not compounded a riddle, thinking to try me? He said to himself: I shall see whether this wise Socrates will discover my ingenious contradiction, or whether I shall be able to deceive him and the rest of them. For he certainly does appear to me to contradict himself in the indictment as much as if he said that Socrates is guilty of not believing in the gods, and yet of believing in them—but this surely is a piece of fun. I should like you, O men of Athens, to join me in examining what I conceive to be his inconsistency; and do you, Meletus, answer. And I must remind you that you are not to interrupt me if I speak in my accustomed manner. Did ever man, Meletus, believe in the existence of human things, and not of human beings?
>
> I wish, men of Athens, that he would answer, and not be always trying to get up an interruption. Did ever any man believe in horsemanship, and not in horses? or in flute-playing, and not in flute-players? No, my friend; I will answer to you and to the court, as you refuse to answer for yourself. There is no man who ever did.
>
> But now please to answer the next question: Can a man believe in spiritual and divine agencies, and not in spirits or demigods?
>
> [Meletus] He cannot.

The point of all these questions, which Meletus surely knew, since he was reluctant to answer, was that it is very hard to be a practitioner of an activity and not have a belief system in that activity. Socrates was probably planning on leading Meletus to his point on spiritual matters gently, but having been trapped before in this conversation, Meletus was learning that silence was a better approach. Not that it mattered—Socrates was going to get to his point with or without Meletus's help. The last question—"Can a man believe in spiritual and divine agencies, and not in spirits or demigods?"—was one to which Meletus would have to answer yes, as any practicing member of religion in Greece at that time would. Armed with this reluctant admission, Socrates launches into his last attack on Meletus's charges.

> I am glad that I have extracted that answer, by the assistance of the court; nevertheless you swear in the indictment that I teach and believe in divine or spiritual agencies (new or old, no matter for that); at any rate, I believe in spiritual agencies, as you say and swear in the affidavit; but if I believe in divine beings, I must believe in spirits or demigods; is not that true?
>
> Yes, that is true, for I may assume that your silence gives assent to that. Now what are spirits or demigods? Are they not either gods or the sons of gods? Is that true? Yes, that is true. But this is just the ingenious riddle of which I was speaking: the demigods or spirits are gods, and you say first that I don't believe in gods, and then again that I do believe in gods; that is, if I believe in demigods. For if the demigods are the illegitimate sons of gods, whether by the Nymphs or by any other mothers, as is thought, that, as all men will allow, necessarily implies the existence of their parents. You might as well affirm the existence of mules, and deny that of horses and asses.
>
> Such nonsense, Meletus, could only have been intended by you as a trial of me. You have put this into the indictment because you had nothing real of which to accuse me. But no one who has a particle of understanding will ever be convinced by you that the same man can believe in divine and superhuman things, and yet not believe that there are gods and demigods and heroes.

With this final barrage, Socrates dismisses Meletus and then begins to argue for the best possible outcome of this trial: Socrates's continued existence.

Unafraid of Death

When Socrates turns to this final phase of his defense, he first begins by pointing out that if indeed the jury finds him guilty and condemns him to death, he's not overly concerned. What matters to him is that he does the right thing.

> Someone will say: And are you not ashamed, Socrates, of a course of life which is likely to bring you to an untimely end? To him I may fairly answer: There you are mistaken: a man who is good for anything ought not to calculate the chance of living or dying; he ought only to consider whether in doing anything he is doing right or wrong—acting the part of a good man or of a bad.

Essentially, Socrates is telling the jury that he doesn't care if they kill him or not. In fact, throughout this line of defense, Socrates repeats the theme that, if he dies, it will do them (the Athenians) more harm than any harm that might befall him. Further, he reiterates the point that no one is truly wise and anyone who admits that would very likely welcome death as another event to be embraced and experienced—not feared:

> For this fear of death is indeed the pretence of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being the appearance of knowing the unknown; since no one knows whether death, which they in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good.
>
> Is there not here conceit of knowledge, which is a disgraceful sort of ignorance? And this is the point in which, as I think, I am superior to men in general, and in which I might perhaps fancy myself wiser than other men, that whereas I know but little of the world below, I do not suppose that I know: but I do know that injustice and disobedience to a better, whether God or man, is evil and dishonorable, and I will never fear or avoid a possible good rather than a certain evil.

Socrates then asserts that regardless of what the jury decides, he's going to keep doing what he's doing. Even if, he muses, the jury were to acquit him on the condition that he never practice his questioning again, Socrates emphatically states that he would ignore their strictures and keep on posing the questions. The reason, he reminds them, is a divine one:

> . . . if this was the condition on which you let me go, I should reply: Men of Athens, I honor and love you; but I shall obey God rather than you, and while I have life and strength I shall never cease from the practice and teaching of philosophy, exhorting anyone whom I meet after my manner, and convincing him, saying: O my friend, why do you who are a citizen of the great and mighty and wise city of Athens, care so much about laying up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all? Are you not ashamed of this? And if the person with whom I am arguing says: Yes, but I do care; I do not depart or let him go at once; I interrogate and examine and cross-examine him, and if I think that he has no virtue, but only says that he has, I reproach him with undervaluing the greater, and overvaluing the less. And this I should say to everyone whom I meet, young and old, citizen and alien, but especially to the citizens, inasmuch as they are my brethren. For this is the command of God, as I would have you know; and I believe that to this day no greater good has ever happened in the state than my service to the God.

Because he is in the service of his god, Socrates believes that he is actually a gift to the citizens of Athens: someone who can challenge their presumptions and make them think of things in a new way. Socrates does mention that he prefers to do this in private and not in a public forum.

Socrates's feelings on politics are rather clear, since he never approved of the old Athenian Assembly, nor the Thirty Tyrants. While carefully not implicating the current government, Socrates cites examples of why he did not get along with either government body:

> Now do you really imagine that I could have survived all these years, if I had led a public life, supposing that like a good man I had always supported the right and had made justice, as I ought, the first thing? No, indeed, men of Athens, neither I nor any other.

Socrates then moves to another point, indicating that if he is indeed a corrupter of youth, then right here in the trial are several examples of the youth he's "corrupted." He then goes on to point out several of his students who are in attendance, including Plato. His point seems to be that if these fine young men are examples of his corruption, then surely Athens has nothing to worry about. He also gives an opening to Meletus, inviting him to bring in anyone he's truly corrupted. But, of course, Meletus has no one to present.

Now Socrates begins to wrap up his defense. He makes a final appeal to the jury to remind them that, like them, he is an ordinary man, entreated to do extraordinary things with his life. He brings up his family, a wife and three sons, not as an emotional appeal, but rather to explain their absence from these proceedings. For if indeed Socrates will feel fear of death, he does not want to humiliate himself in front of his loved ones.

But Socrates maintains he is fearless to the end, citing that he does not want to be like those accused men who do nothing but beg and plead for their lives. To Socrates, who believes that all men can do good in their own way, pleading for leniency is just plain silly.

In the end, Socrates asks the jury to take his words to heart, in a way that was likely one last jab at the charge of atheism:

> For if, O men of Athens, by force of persuasion and entreaty, I could overpower your oaths, then I should be teaching you to believe that there are no gods, and convict myself, in my own defense, of not believing in them. But that is not the case; for I do believe that there are gods, and in a far higher sense than that in which any of my accusers believe in them. And to you and to God I commit my cause, to be determined by you as is best for you and me.

Found Guilty

After such an eloquent argument, modern readers are often convinced that Socrates is being framed on ridiculous charges and that any jury would find him innocent. Modern readers, however, often view the concept of law and justice though modern means. Much of what we define as law was not quite in place in this Athenian society. Political agendas and emotionalism played a huge role in affecting jurors' decisions.

Socrates must have known, going into this trial, that the odds were stacked against him; juries were open to all available men, and surely Meletus and his friends invited as many cohorts as they could to get the conviction they wanted. This may have been why Socrates was so resigned to death in the first place. Still, even Socrates was surprised by the vote of 280-221 for conviction. This was a much closer outcome than anyone would have expected, given Meletus's vehemence for a guilty verdict.

> There are many reasons why I am not grieved, O men of Athens, at the vote of condemnation. I expected it, and am only surprised that the votes are so nearly equal; for I had thought that the majority against me would have been far larger; but now, had thirty votes gone over to the other side, I should have been acquitted. And I may say that I have escaped Meletus. And I may say more; for without the assistance of Anytus and Lycon, he would not have had a fifth part of the votes, as the law requires, in which case he would have incurred a fine of a thousand drachmae, as is evident.

If Socrates is going out of his way to stick it to Meletus, Anytus, and Lycon, he must surely be forgiven, because he has just been found guilty of the charges set against him. In this phase of the trial is the sentencing, in which the convicted is given the opportunity to argue for his sentence. Of course, Socrates being Socrates does no such thing. Believing himself to be innocent of these charges, he brashly suggests a number of sentences likely calculated to either demonstrate his disdain at this entire proceeding, his utter irreverence for what the jurors felt, or how angry he could make them.

Instead of death, Socrates suggests that the jury condemn him to a lifestyle vastly different than his own for punishment. Because he has had to give up many of his possessions and wealth to pursue his divine mission, he recommends that the jury put him up as a ward of the state, feeding him on the public dole. Socrates argues that this isn't such a bad idea, since this would give him time to patiently and carefully explain what he's trying to do, rather than this brief moment he's had at this trial. He must see the audience's disgruntlement at this suggestion, because he moves on to other suggestions:

> Shall I say imprisonment? And why should I live in prison, and be the slave of the magistrates of the year of the Eleven? Or shall the penalty be a fine, and imprisonment until the fine is paid? There is the same objection. I should have to lie in prison, for money I have none, and I cannot pay.

Exile is another option Socrates brings up, but he patiently explains to the jurors that if he is cast out, he will either keep asking his questions (very likely getting into the same kind of trouble he's in now) or he will have to keep quiet. Keeping quiet is something that Socrates doesn't seem likely to do, and he admits it freely:

> Someone will say: Yes, Socrates, but cannot you hold your tongue, and then you may go into a foreign city, and no one will interfere with you? Now I have great difficulty in making you understand my answer to this. For if I tell you that this would be a disobedience to a divine command, and therefore that I cannot hold my tongue, you will not believe that I am serious; and if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living—that you are still less likely to believe. And yet what I say is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you.

This argument contains a very oft-quoted passage from Socrates: "the life which is unexamined is not worth living." This is the core of everything Socrates believes. To examine himself and those around him is his passion, his obsession. This, perhaps, more than any divine influence, is the main motivation for his questioning. To give this up would be like giving up part of his soul.

Finally, he makes a last suggestion for a fine of 30 minae, which he believes his students (including Plato) could pay on his behalf. Such a fine might not impress the jury, since Socrates gets no real punishment from that, either. At this point, the jury votes on the sentence and finds death to be the appropriate punishment.

A Man Condemned

After his sentencing, Socrates keeps on talking to the jury, berating those who condemned him as being too afraid to face up to the questions he had for them and implying that their condemnation of him would raise him in stature and defame the city. In this, he would be only half right: both Socrates and Athens are well-regarded in the annals of history.

Socrates further attacks his condemners, saying that if they had only waited a short time, it would be very likely that he would have died of old age rather than by their own hand. For those who were willing to acquit him, Socrates has kinder words. He invites them to stay around while the trial is closing and talk with him further about all of this. Clearly, he sees a sympathetic audience, and one more chance to examine those around him and, in turn, be examined.

Socrates asks them not to lament, for he does not fear the prospect of death. It is either going to be an endless sleep or a journey to another place. In either case, Socrates asserts, this is nothing to fear. He is looking forward to the experience:

> Wherefore, O judges, be of good cheer about death, and know this of a truth—that no evil can happen to a good man, either in life or after death. He and his are not neglected by the gods; nor has my own approaching end happened by

> mere chance. But I see clearly that to die and be released was better for me; and therefore the oracle gave no sign. For which reason also, I am not angry with my accusers, or my condemners; they have done me no harm, although neither of them meant to do me any good; and for this I may gently blame them.

Even in the end, Socrates seems to take his own words to heart and does not seek to label anyone as evil. All the players in this drama, it seemed to him, were just playing their parts, and ultimately what would it matter, because death was nothing to be feared?

Much of what is known about the remainder of Socrates's days is gathered from other sources, particularly Plato's *Phaedo,* because *Apology* ends here with a request for the men of Athens to watch out for his sons, and be prepared to punish them for living like their father or admonishing them if they lived like the rest of Athenian society. It is known from *Phaedo* that Socrates was to live in prison for about a month until his sentence was carried out. Plato visited his teacher in prison but did not attend the actual execution—death by hemlock poisoning.

In *Apology* and *Phaedo,* Socrates often mentions how he does not fear death, and he urges the ones around him not to grieve for him. Plato held on to his master's memory for a long time, which we see in later dialogues.

That *Apology* is the first dialogue attributed to Plato is a testament to just how strongly Plato felt for his teacher and mentor. That the dialogue survived gives us not only a look into that devotion, but also a look at one of the greatest philosophers of our time.

4 Meno

"You argue that man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire. . . ."

—Socrates, *Meno*

Meno is a work of fiction, with Plato paying tribute to his former teacher's dialectic process of inquiry. The conversation contained in this work did not actually happen—Socrates would not have focused on this aspect of virtue. But Plato sticks to Socrates's dialectic method throughout all his works. This chapter explains why *Meno* was written, what questions it sought to answer, and some of the answers that were put forth by Plato.

Perspective on Meno

Plato's *Meno,* which was written in 380 B.C.E., reveals a dialogue between two central characters trying to discover whether virtue can be taught or whether it is something that is innate within human beings. Because one of the central characters is Socrates, readers of Plato know this is not a question that will be answered in a straightforward way.

The dialogue is set around 402 B.C.E., about three years before the execution of Socrates. Plato wrote this dialogue after the founding of his Academy and after his first trip to Sicily. The influence of his journey is apparent in *Meno.* In the dialogue, Socrates is conversing with Meno, a young aristocrat. They are both in the home of Anytus, who is hosting Meno during his visit to Athens. Anytus is a powerful figure in both the old and new Athenian Assembly, and presumably a fairly wealthy man as well. If this name sounds familiar, recall from Chapter 3 that this is the same Anytus who was one of Socrates's accusers at his trial.

Meno is actually an introductory dialogue to *Phaedo,* in which Socrates is about to be executed and examines the concept of immortality. In *Meno,* Socrates will briefly touch on this topic, but the central focus is on the issue of what is virtue and how it is learned.

Unlike *Apology,* which held very little conversational interplay and almost reads like a monologue, *Meno* is a very dynamic conversation between the two central characters and two supporting characters (the aforementioned Anytus and a slave of Meno). There is humor, anger, and a touch of foreshadowing in this dialogue. Plato writes about his mentor's main goal throughout his teaching and conversing.

Also unlike *Apology,* it is not known if the events in *Meno* ever really happened, at least not all in one conversation. Plato may have been summarizing the best of his teacher's arguments from a number of statements and conversations that Socrates made in his life. It is not impossible for this exact conversation to have occurred, of course, but Plato used the dialogue format to convey ideas and was quite willing at times to make up characters to suit the "voices" he needed.

Meno, like all the rest of the Socratic and Platonic dialogues, with the exception of *Apology,* is a work created solely to get across a number of philosophical ideas. Although *Meno* primarily represents the search for the ability to learn virtue, it also touches on a number of other questions, such as "What is virtue?" and "How is any knowledge taught?" *Meno* reads like a play to modern English readers, but unlike a play, it does not spend any time setting up the characters or where the dialogue is taking place. It starts and ends abruptly; Plato approaches the heart of his arguments very quickly. Beginning with the very first line of the dialogue, the search begins.

The Nature of Virtue

> Can you tell me, Socrates, whether virtue is acquired by teaching or by practice; or if neither by teaching nor practice, then whether it comes to man by nature, or in what other way?

And with that one question, the characters of *Meno* and the readers are launched on a noble task of discovery—or so it seems. When Meno asks this question of Socrates, the Athenian immediately begins to characterize Meno's question as something reminiscent of the Sophist Gorgias, who was familiar in Athens and in Thessaly, Meno's home region. Gorgias, Socrates teases Meno, has the habit of "answering questions in a grand and bold style, which becomes those who know." Now Meno is doing the same to Socrates—asking a bold question and expecting a bold answer.

Socrates will deliver nothing of the sort. Socrates immediately deflects the question, arguing that he, like any other Athenian he knows, is scarcely able to even define virtue, let alone figure out if it is teachable.

Meno thinks this answer is a bit modest. He's talking to Socrates, after all, a teacher of some renown, even back in Thessaly. Meno brings up Gorgias himself, and asks if Socrates had ever met this Sophist. Despite the fact that Socrates just brought him up and will later describe events surrounding Gorgias in detail, Socrates will play dumb and tell Meno that he really can't recall much about Gorgias since he met him long ago.

This is a setup on the part of Socrates: like the master questioner he is, he wants to get to what Meno thinks about virtue, not Gorgias, since Gorgias is a Sophist whom Socrates has little respect for. So, deftly feigning ignorance, and perhaps stroking Meno's ego by comparing Meno's ideas to Gorgias, Socrates asks Meno for his own views on the matter.

Meno, who is quite confident in his knowledge of the way of things (though that's about to be seriously challenged) brashly answers that he will have no problem describing to Socrates what virtue is, and then proceeds to list a whole slew of virtues. The reader can almost hear the glee in Socrates's voice after Meno finishes:

> [Meno] There will be no difficulty, Socrates, in answering your question. Let us take first the virtue of a man—he should know how to administer the state, and in the administration of it to benefit his friends and harm his enemies; and he must also be careful not to suffer harm himself. A woman's virtue, if you wish to know about that, may also be easily described: her duty is to order her house, and keep what is indoors, and obey her husband. Every age, every condition of life, young or old, male or female, bond or free, has a different virtue: there are virtues numberless, and no lack of definitions of them; for virtue is relative to the actions and ages of each of us in all that we do. And the same may be said of vice, Socrates.
>
> [Socrates] How fortunate I am, Meno! When I ask you for one virtue, you present me with a swarm of them, which are in your keeping.

Meno has listed a number of different virtues and, what's more, he has ascribed different virtues to different types of persons. A man, he reasons, should know how to administer his actions and the actions of those around him so that he can give and receive benefit. A woman, on the other hand, is virtuous if she keeps her house in order and obeys her husband.

It's important to note that Meno hasn't really answered Socrates's question; he has just listed a number of examples that are actually outward symptoms of virtue. Socrates immediately goes to work on this, expanding on his "swarm" statement with a full-blown analogy.

> [Socrates] Suppose that I carry on the figure of the swarm, and ask of you, What is the nature of the bee? and you answer that there are many kinds of bees, and I reply: But do bees differ as bees, because there are many and different kinds of them; or are they not rather to be distinguished by some other quality, as for example beauty, size, or shape? How would you answer me?
>
> [Meno] I should answer that bees do not differ from one another, as bees.
>
> [Socrates] And if I went on to say: That is what I desire to know, Meno; tell me what is the quality in which they do not differ, but are all alike;—would you be able to answer?
>
> [Meno] I should.
>
> [Socrates] And so of the virtues, however many and different they may be, they have all a common nature which makes them virtues; and on this he who would answer the question, "What is virtue?" would do well to have his eye fixed: Do you understand?
>
> [Meno] I am beginning to understand; but I do not as yet take hold of the question as I could wish.

Socrates uses this analogy of bees to indicate to Meno that, although anyone can list a string of virtues (just as anyone can describe different kinds of bees), what Socrates really wants to know is what is the one constant that is present throughout all forms of virtue? Knowing that constant trait, Socrates believes, is the real answer to his question.

Meno begins to get this, but he is honest enough to admit that it hasn't quite clicked for him yet. Socrates continues, asking if Meno believes that the natures of health and strength are the same, regardless of age or gender. When Meno replies in the affirmative, Socrates follows up with his point, which Meno is hesitant to accept:

> [Socrates] And will not virtue, as virtue, be the same, whether in a child or in a grown-up person, in a woman or in a man[?]
>
> [Meno] I cannot help feeling, Socrates, that this case is different from the others.

Socrates presses on, bringing up Meno's own examples of virtue to illustrate the commonality of virtues:

> [Socrates] But why? Were you not saying that the virtue of a man was to order a state, and the virtue of a woman was to order a house?

[Meno] I did say so.

[Socrates] And can either house or state or anything be well ordered without temperance and without justice?

[Meno] Certainly not.

[Socrates] Then they who order a state or a house temperately or justly order them with temperance and justice?

[Meno] Certainly.

[Socrates] Then both men and women, if they are to be good men and women, must have the same virtues of temperance and justice?

[Meno] True.

[Socrates] And can either a young man or an elder one be good, if they are intemperate and unjust?

[Meno] They cannot.

[Socrates] They must be temperate and just?

[Meno] Yes.

[Socrates] Then all men are good in the same way, and by participation in the same virtues?

[Meno] Such is the inference.

[Socrates] And they surely would not have been good in the same way, unless their virtue had been the same?

[Meno] They would not.

[Socrates] Then now that the sameness of all virtue has been proven, try and remember what you and Gorgias say that virtue is.

[Meno] Will you have one definition of them all?

[Socrates] That is what I am seeking.

[Meno] If you want to have one definition of them all, I know not what to say, but that virtue is the power of governing mankind.

Socrates, and we the readers, have finally managed to pull out a definition of virtue from Meno. Socrates has illustrated that there is some inherent nature of virtue that must be the same for all people. When Meno understands this, he concludes that virtue is the power of ruling men. This is the first of three definitions of virtue that

are revealed in Meno. There are two more definitions, because Socrates, in his usual manner, is off and running again, attempting to home in on a better definition.

First, Socrates pokes at Meno's definition by asking if the ability to govern is a state that applies to everyone. Can a child govern a parent? A slave his master? Meno naturally replies in the negative, and Socrates moves on to ask Meno if he would not like to add the term *justly* to his definition of virtue: "the power of governing mankind justly."

Meno agrees to this revision, because he believes "justice is virtue." Socrates then asks his companion if he means "virtue" or "a virtue." At this point, Meno appears to mentally stop in his tracks, because it seems Socrates is explaining a concept that, perhaps because of his confidence, Meno really never explored before. Initially, he doesn't seem to get it, so Socrates tries to use an example of figures, or shapes.

> [Socrates] I mean as I might say about anything; that a round, for example, is "a figure" and not simply "figure," and I should adopt this mode of speaking, because there are other figures.
>
> [Meno] Quite right; and that is just what I am saying about virtue—that there are other virtues as well as justice.
>
> [Socrates] What are they? [T]ell me the names of them, as I would tell you the names of the other figures if you asked me.
>
> [Meno] Courage and temperance and wisdom and magnanimity are virtues; and there are many others.
>
> [Socrates] Yes, Meno; and again we are in the same case: in searching after one virtue we have found many, though not in the same way as before; but we have been unable to find the common virtue which runs through them all.
>
> [Meno] Why, Socrates, even now I am not able to follow you in the attempt to get at one common notion of virtue as of other things.

Meno seems right on the edge of understanding here, but he is clearly struggling to understand what Socrates is getting at: one common property that threads through all these virtues that Meno can easily list. This is revealed in the next reply from Socrates, as he empathizes with his companion's confusion: "No wonder; but I will try to get nearer if I can, for you know that all things have a common notion."

If Meno does, indeed, know this, he seems to be having problems applying it to something as abstract as virtue. Socrates tries a different tack, and for a while seems to abandon the examination of virtue. It is only for a while; he'll come back to it. Instead, Socrates now focuses on the examples of shape and color to help define what he's seeking.

Socrates will examine the differences between "shape" and "a shape," as well as "color" and "a color." After laying the groundwork for what he believes constitutes shape, Socrates asks Meno is he can bring forth the final answer. Meno demurs, instead asking Socrates for his definition. Socrates agrees, only if Meno promises to tell him his best definition of virtue.

In the course of the dialogue, Socrates actually provides two definitions: that shape is "that which always follows color"—a definition neither he nor Socrates seems satisfied with; or that shape is "that in which the solid ends; or, more concisely, the limit of the solid."

Meno presses Socrates further, asking for the elder man's definition of color. Reluctantly, Socrates agrees, though he complains that Meno is not living up to his end of the bargain. Eventually, he explains that color "is an effluence of form, commensurate with sight, and palpable to sense." This little deviation from the quest for virtue may have twofold meaning. Obviously, the character of Socrates is indulging Meno and trying to frame his question in a way Meno can more readily answer at the same time. But the reader of this dialogue may be seeing the first signs of Platonic, not Socratic, thought.

At this point in his life, Plato is becoming focused on the concepts of mathematical expression of real objects—especially after meeting the Pythagorians in southern Italy. At the time of this writing, that event was already several years' past, so clearly the influence of that teaching is starting to shine through. Plato has not quite broken away from his master's teachings, and whether through homage or genuine exploration, he's still taking on the quest for virtue.

When Socrates provides Meno with the definitions of *shape* and *color,* he gets Meno to provide his third definition of virtue:

> [Socrates] . . . and now, in your turn, you are to fulfill your promise, and tell me what virtue is in the universal; and do not make a singular into a plural, as the facetious say of those who break a thing, but deliver virtue to me whole and sound, and not broken into a number of pieces: I have given you the pattern.
>
> [Meno] Well then, Socrates, virtue, as I take it, is when he, who desires the honorable, is able to provide it for himself; so the poet says, and I say too—
>
> Virtue is the desire of things honorable and the power of attaining them.

Socrates immediately refutes this with a line of reasoning that he uses many times within the Platonic dialogues. He objects to the first part of this definition because he firmly believes that everyone desires to be honorable. He also rejects the second part of the definition, because if people just use any method of attaining honorable things, then that really isn't virtuous at all.

This idea ties in with a common theme in Socrates's reasoning, which states that all men want to do good. Evil only happens when someone does not know what the true good is. From all men's perspective, everything they do is good—even if it's only to them. Socrates also believes that anyone who does not do good will come to harm eventually, so where is the motive for doing wrong?

When Socrates refutes this third definition of virtue, Meno is clearly getting frustrated with this conversation, for his original question is still not being answered, because neither of them can agree on what virtue is. In his frustration, Meno will ask Socrates a question that will turn the dialogue away from the meaning of virtue and toward the meaning of learning itself.

The Paradox of Learning

In *Meno,* there are three main themes of exploration. The first, which we have read about, is the definition of virtue. The second is an examination of what can be learned at all. Finally, there is an effort to tie these two themes together and try to apply both concepts to the original question from Meno: Can virtue be taught?

After baffling Meno to the extreme, the young visitor to Athens loudly complains to Socrates that Socrates's questions and methods are driving him crazy. He half-teases Socrates and compares the elder teacher to a torpedo fish (most likely an electric eel), who shocks all that come near. Socrates does not seem to take too much offense at the simile and fires one right back at Meno.

> [Socrates] I can tell why you made a simile about me.
>
> [Meno] Why?
>
> [Socrates] In order that I might make another simile about you. For I know that all pretty young gentlemen like to have pretty similes made about them—as well they may—but I shall not return the compliment. As to my being a torpedo, if the torpedo is torpid as well as the cause of torpidity in others, then indeed I am a torpedo, but not otherwise; for I perplex others, not because I am clear, but because I am utterly perplexed myself. And now I know not what virtue is, and you seem to be in the same case, although you did once perhaps know before you touched me. However, I have no objection to join with you in the enquiry.
>
> [Meno] And how will you enquire, Socrates, into that which you do not know? What will you put forth as the subject of enquiry? And if you find what you want, how will you ever know that this is the thing which you did not know?

And with this last question, Plato, through the character of Meno, has presented us with the Paradox of Inquiry, also known as Meno's Paradox. Indeed, Socrates's next response summarizes the paradox quite well:

> I know, Meno, what you mean; but just see what a tiresome dispute you are introducing. You argue that man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire.

Essentially, Socrates frames Meno's question in this way: A person either (a) knows something or (b) does not know something. If condition (a) is true, then there is no need for a person to ask about the "something." If condition (b) is true, then the person can't ask about the "something" because he can't ask about what he doesn't know. According to this set of arguments, learning is not possible. But learning is clearly demonstrated in everyday life, so this line of reasoning, although seeming perfectly logical, is a paradox.

Socrates forcefully rejects this paradox, and sets himself on a course to prove to Meno why. To do so, Socrates recites part of a popular poem that asserts Socrates's belief that the soul is immortal and lives out lives over and over again. Because this is the case, when someone supposedly learns something, what he is really doing is recalling something he sensed in a previous life. When he finishes laying out this theory of recollection, Socrates is more than ready to get back to the question of virtue, but Meno wants more. In fact, he asks Socrates to teach him about the "process of recollection":

> [Socrates] I told you, Meno, just now that you were a rogue, and now you ask whether I can teach you, when I am saying that there is no teaching, but only recollection; and thus you imagine that you will involve me in a contradiction.
>
> [Meno] Indeed, Socrates, I protest that I had no such intention. I only asked the question from habit; but if you can prove to me that what you say is true, I wish that you would.
>
> [Socrates] It will be no easy matter, but I will try to please you to the utmost of my power. Suppose that you call one of your numerous attendants, that I may demonstrate on him.

Now Socrates begins to demonstrate to Meno that the boy, who apparently has no prior knowledge of geometry, does indeed have some recollection of basic geometric skills, based on the quizzing Socrates gives the boy. Through a series of questions, Socrates establishes a pattern that the boy quickly picks up and applies to

Socrates's more-difficult questions. Meno is impressed at this demonstration, which Socrates concludes by reestablishing his belief in an immortal soul:

> [Socrates] But if he always possessed this knowledge he would always have known; or if he has acquired the knowledge he could not have acquired it in this life, unless he has been taught geometry; for he may be made to do the same with all geometry and every other branch of knowledge. Now, has any one ever taught him all this? You must know about him, if, as you say, he was born and bred in your house.
>
> [Meno] And I am certain that no one ever did teach him.
>
> [Socrates] And yet he has the knowledge?
>
> [Meno] The fact, Socrates, is undeniable.
>
> [Socrates] But if he did not acquire the knowledge in this life, then he must have had and learned it at some other time?
>
> [Meno] Clearly he must.
>
> [Socrates] Which must have been the time when he was not a man?
>
> [Meno] Yes.
>
> [Socrates] And if there have been always true thoughts in him, both at the time when he was and was not a man, which only need to be awakened into knowledge by putting questions to him, his soul must have always possessed this knowledge, for he always either was or was not a man?
>
> [Meno] Obviously.
>
> [Socrates] And if the truth of all things always existed in the soul, then the soul is immortal.

Interestingly, instead of claiming that, because the soul is immortal and, therefore, all knowledge is inherent and accessible within us all, Socrates maintains that there is always going to be a difference between knowledge that is easily called up and knowledge which is only arrived at through the kind of inquiry the young boy has just been subjected to. In fact, without this sort of inquiry, a lot of knowledge will lie buried, never tapped and brought to the surface. Having proved this to Meno's—and his own—satisfaction, Socrates is ready to move on.

> [Socrates] Wherefore be of good cheer, and try to recollect what you do not know, or rather what you do not remember.
>
> [Meno] I feel, somehow, that I like what you are saying.

> [Socrates] And I, Meno, like what I am saying. Some things I have said of which I am not altogether confident. But that we shall be better and braver and less helpless if we think that we ought to enquire, than we should have been if we indulged in the idle fancy that there was no knowing and no use in seeking to know what we do not know;—that is a theme upon which I am ready to fight, in word and deed, to the utmost of my power.
>
> [Meno] There again, Socrates, your words seem to me excellent.
>
> [Socrates] Then, as we are agreed that a man should enquire about that which he does not know, shall you and I make an effort to enquire together into the nature of virtue?
>
> [Meno] By all means, Socrates.

Teaching Virtue

Of course, Meno is not going to make it easy for Socrates, because he immediately pursues his original question, "Whether in seeking to acquire virtue we should regard it as a thing to be taught, or as a gift of nature, or as coming to men in some other way?"

One wonders if Socrates was prone to slapping his forehead in frustration, as Meno seems to have completely ignored Socrates's whole premise that they could not figure out if virtue is taught without first knowing what virtue is. Very reluctantly, Socrates agrees to answer Meno's question, but he first wants to reframe the question.

> And we too, as we know not the nature and qualities of virtue, must ask, whether virtue is or not taught, under a hypothesis: as thus, if virtue is of such a class of mental goods, will it be taught or not? Let the first hypothesis be that virtue is or is not knowledge,— in that case will it be taught or not? or, as we were just now saying, remembered? For there is no use in disputing about the name. But is virtue taught or not? or rather, does not everyone see that knowledge alone is taught?

Meno agrees to this assertion, and Socrates responds that if they can indeed establish virtue as a form of knowledge, then they've already answered the question about whether it can be taught, based on Socrates's theory of recollection. Which leads Socrates to a second hypothesis: "Whether virtue is knowledge or of another species?" To try to answer this second hypothesis, Socrates goes back to an earlier assertion in this dialogue—that virtue is a good. If they can demonstrate that knowledge embraces all that is good, then virtue is a part of knowledge. But if virtue is a good separate from knowledge, then the question of learning it becomes more difficult to answer.

Socrates and Meno step through a series of assertions that does indeed seem to demonstrate that virtue is a part of knowledge, but Socrates holds short of actually linking virtue and knowledge, because he is apparently stuck on an obstacle. If virtue is indeed knowledge, which can be learned, who in the world is qualified to teach virtue? To try to answer this question, Socrates calls over their host, the politician Anytus. Socrates quickly has Anytus confirm statements regarding who is qualified to teach what: a cobbler to teach shoemaking, a physician to teach the healing arts, a flautist to teach flute-playing, and so on. Anytus agrees with these assertions but balks when Socrates suggests that one possible set of teachers of virtue might be the Sophists.

> [Socrates] You surely know, do you not, Anytus, that these are the people whom mankind call Sophists?
>
> [Anytus] By Heracles, Socrates, forbear! I only hope that no friend or kinsman or acquaintance of mine, whether citizen or stranger, will ever be so mad as to allow himself to be corrupted by them; for they are a manifest pest and corrupting influences to those who have to do with them.
>
> [Socrates] What, Anytus? Of all the people who profess that they know how to do men good, do you mean to say that these are the only ones who not only do them no good, but positively corrupt those who are entrusted to them, and in return for this disservice have the face to demand money? Indeed, I cannot believe you; for I know of a single man, Protagoras, who made more out of his craft than the illustrious Pheidias, who created such noble works, or any ten other statuaries. How could that a mender of old shoes, or patcher up of clothes, who made the shoes or clothes worse than he received them, could not have remained thirty days undetected, and would very soon have starved; whereas during more than forty years, Protagoras was corrupting all Hellas, and sending his disciples from him worse than he received them, and he was never found out. For, if I am not mistaken, he was about seventy years old at his death, forty of which were spent in the practice of his profession; and during all that time he had a good reputation, which to this day he retains: and not only Protagoras, but many others are well spoken of; some who lived before him, and others who are still living. Now, when you say that they deceived and corrupted the youth, are they to be supposed to have corrupted them consciously or unconsciously? Can those who were deemed by many to be the wisest men of Hellas have been out of their minds?
>
> [Anytus] Out of their minds! No, Socrates; the young men who gave their money to them, were out of their minds, and their relations and guardians who entrusted their youth to the care of these men were still more out of their minds, and most of all, the cities who allowed them to come in, and did not drive them out, citizen and stranger alike.

> [Socrates] Has any of the Sophists wronged you, Anytus? What makes you so angry with them?
>
> [Anytus] No, indeed, neither I nor any of my belongings has ever had, nor would I suffer them to have, anything to do with them.

Anytus's negative reaction to the Sophists reflects the attitude that Athenians have toward the teachers-for-hire who clung to Athenian society. Sophists were a new concept in Athens, something that the very conservative government tended to distrust out of the gate.

Socrates questions Anytus a bit more on the legitimacy of the Sophists, then moves on to query if certain select citizens in Athens might be qualified to teach virtue. But everyone Socrates has suggested has had an offspring who went in a completely different direction in life than his father. To Socrates, this indicated that whatever portions of virtue the wise fathers had, they clearly weren't always able to have that wisdom imparted to the sons. Of course, as he continues this line of questioning, Anytus gets angrier and parts the conversation with a foreshadowing comment:

> [Socrates] Now, can there be a doubt that Thucydides, whose children were taught things for which he had to spend money, would have taught them to be good men, which would have cost him nothing, if virtue could have been taught? Will you reply that he was a mean man, and had not many friends among the Athenians and allies? Nay, but he was of a great family, and a man of influence at Athens and in all Hellas, and, if virtue could have been taught, he would have found out some Athenian or foreigner who would have made good men of his sons, if he could not himself spare the time from cares of state. Once more, I suspect, friend Anytus, that virtue is not a thing which can be taught.
>
> [Anytus] Socrates, I think that you are too ready to speak evil of men: and, if you will take my advice, I would recommend you to be careful. Perhaps there is no city in which it is not easier to do men harm than to do them good, and this is certainly the case at Athens, as I believe that you know.

Knowledge and Belief

After Anytus leaves Meno and Socrates alone, the two are still locked in their discussion about virtue and its teaching. Meno, after listening to Socrates confirm his point about there being no good teachers of virtue available, at least by their knowledge, asks Socrates a very good question:

> But I cannot believe, Socrates, that there are no good men: And if there are, how did they come into existence?

Here, Socrates launches into another analogy, this time to differentiate between what is knowledge and what is true opinion, or belief:

> [Socrates] If a man knew the way to Larisa, or anywhere else, and went to the place and led others thither, would he not be a right and good guide?
>
> [Meno] Certainly.
>
> [Socrates] And a person who had a right opinion about the way, but had never been and did not know, might be a good guide also, might he not?
>
> [Meno] Certainly.
>
> [Socrates] And while he has true opinion about that which the other knows, he will be just as good a guide if he thinks the truth, as he who knows the truth?
>
> [Meno] Exactly.
>
> [Socrates] Then true opinion is as good a guide to correct action as knowledge; and that was the point which we omitted in our speculation about the nature of virtue, when we said that knowledge only is the guide of right action; whereas there is also right opinion.

This part of *Meno* is alluding to what historians and philosophers would later label Plato's Theory of Forms. Socrates asserts that people have knowledge if they have true beliefs and have also grasped the reasons for knowledge.

There is a link, Plato is saying through Socrates, between knowledge and teaching that mere recollection will not explain. Belief in something is also important to the acquisition of knowledge. The missing something that links knowledge and learning is what Plato will begin to describe in his later dialogues.

The characters of Socrates and Meno seem to have come to a final, though ultimately challengeable, assertion on the question of virtue and if it can be taught. Socrates concludes that virtue, like belief, is good. Anyone who is actually virtuous (provided a definition of virtue could ever be found) has a belief in virtue, not merely knowledge of it.

Because virtue is a belief, Socrates has skirted the whole knowledge/recollection question and placed virtue in a category all on its own. Essentially, because virtue is a belief, it could be something that is divinely bestowed upon men by the gods, or, in rare instances, something that can be passed on to others by the examples of the virtuous. Socrates also indicates that there is still a way to go before the ability to teach virtue can be answered. Virtue must be correctly defined—at which time all of its characteristics will be ascertained.

5 Republic

"For what men say is that, if I am really just and am not also thought just, profit there is none, but the pain and loss on the other hand are unmistakable. But if, though unjust, I acquire the reputation of justice, a heavenly life is promised to me."

—Adeimantus, *Republic*

It has been called a blueprint for the perfect society. Governments and empires have tried to emulate in some fashion the ideas put forth in this work. But this dialogue of Plato was not trying to model the perfect government—it was trying to model the human soul. This chapter explains why *Republic* is so important to so many different people in societies both past and present.

Perspective on Republic

Of all Plato's dialogues, *Republic* is regarded by many scholars as the greatest work of his life. It was not the longest—*The Laws* holds that distinction—but in terms of its impact on philosophy, *Republic* is Plato's most powerful work. So why does it hold this distinction?

Several things take place in *Republic,* much more than Plato's other dialogues. Plato's characters are in a dialectic search for the concept of justice. Along the way, the dialogue between these men touches on many powerful themes, such as Plato's Metaphor of the Cave, the concept of an ideal Utopian state, the place of art in education, an early exploration of Plato's Theory of Forms, and the true meaning of what is just and what isn't.

Like many of Plato's dialogues, Socrates plays the central figure in the work. He is the best foil for Plato to use against his other characters to draw out the ideas Plato wishes to bring out in the course of the work, and in *Republic* he does his job well.

It is in *Republic* that we really start to see Socrates's words not as a faithful representation of something Socrates said at one time or even might have said. In the years after his mentor's death, Plato gained a lot of his own experiences and ideas, which come out strongly in the writings of this period of his life. The strongest evidence for this was the overarching theme in *Republic* itself: the concept of justice—not justice as a virtue, nor anything about virtues. Plato had moved beyond his teacher's focus on the meaning and definition of virtue and was now exploring other issues. He was also exploring them in different ways.

One thing that usually strikes modern Western readers as odd about *Republic* is that, when Plato describes his perfect Utopian government, it's not the democratic structure that many Westerners place such a high value upon. Plato thought that democracy was not a good way to go. Although it was better than a tyrannical dictatorship, the idea of giving power to the people was an anathema to Plato—he thought democracy led to too many distractions and too much chaos. Instead, Plato brought forth the notion that the best government would be one led by a philosopher-king. Someone who, by being a philosopher, would have the best sense of what was truly "good" and would thus rule in the best possible manner.

Besides being longer than the other dialogues, *Republic* is also traditionally organized into ten separate books, each giving a strong dialectic look at their respective topics. Plato very likely did not section off this dialogue in this way—it was likely done by a later scholar. Other scholars have organized *Republic* into other groupings—usually five or six sections—that make more thematic sense to them. This book sticks with the traditional ten-book organization as it references passages and outlines themes.

Characters of Republic

Republic stands out from the other dialogues examined in this book for another reason. Stylistically, although the work is still structured as a dialogue between two or three characters at a time, it reads more like a narrative to modern readers. Plato moved away from the strict "script" form of dialogue and put one of his characters in the part of the first-person narrator.

The character is, naturally, Socrates—but this version of Socrates is a bit different from the version Plato has used before. Although many of the same personal beliefs of the real Socrates are held by this character, there are instances in which this Socrates diverges from ideas we have seen Socrates express in other works. Plato's works were never meant to be a strict biographical reconstruction of Socrates, though many have gleaned much insight into Plato's mentor through the retellings and analyses of Plato's dialogues. Still, *Republic* serves as a clear reminder that this Socrates is merely a representation of the real person.

There are five other characters in *Republic,* though there are never more than three characters in active dialogue at any point in the work. First, there is Cephalus, the elderly man who is the eldest of the household that all the characters are visiting. In his age and stately manner, Cephalus seems to represent the point of view of those who are older, wise, and just. His son, Polemarchus, is the owner of the home Socrates ends up visiting. Polemarchus is impatient, a bit strident, and a good example of the bluster and impetuousness of youth.

Also in the home is Thrasymachus, who is meant to be representative of the thoughts and manners of the Sophists. Given Socrates's antipathy toward that group of people, it is little wonder that Socrates immediately launches into a series of questions and arguments that gets Thrasymachus to completely shut up by the end of Book I, never to be heard from again.

The other two characters are the brothers Glaucon and Adeimantus, with whom Socrates maintains most of his discourses through the rest of *Republic.* Like Polemarchus, Glaucon is also young and carries many of the mannerisms of youth. Plato has created a more likeable character in Glaucon than Polemarchus, however—certainly Socrates likes him enough to keep talking with him for most of *Republic*. Adeimantus is sterner and more introspective than his brother. His character pursues arguments with Socrates more deeply. Adeimantus seems to embody the more seasoned outlook of the grown man: someone who is open to new ideas but has seen enough of the world already to form his own opinions.

Therefore, in these principal characters, the reader is presented with the three stages of humanity: youth, maturity, and old age. Plato, through his characterization of Socrates, plays off each of these representations through *Republic.*

The Themes of Republic

Republic has been analyzed by countless historians and philosophers throughout the centuries. Little wonder—there is so much of the work to examine. In these analyses, many themes and meanings have been gleaned from *Republic,* far too many to present here. But, despite the diversity of ideas gained from *Republic,* some common ideas have been agreed upon.

Many would agree that the most obvious overarching theme of *Republic* has to be the search for the meaning of justice. Plato touches on this in earlier dialogues, of course, but usually justice is presented as a possible representative of a virtue or virtue itself. Within that framework, Plato touched upon the concept of justice, but in those dialogues justice seemed to be a secondary concept, presented to move the dialectic to topics Plato wished to explore in his (and Socrates's) earlier search for virtue.

Perhaps the most prevalent framework Plato uses to describe justice is its place within government. On several occasions, Socrates and his companions use the rules of man as examples to describe what justice is, what it should be, and what it isn't, at least from their point of view. As these discussions take place, Plato takes the opportunity to describe certain ideas that reflect what he feels is the ideal form of government. These ideals are often referenced by political students as well as philosophers when referring to what is right and wrong about any given political system.

Students and practitioners will, of course, take what they want from *Republic,* though many have often mistakenly thought the dialogue was a blueprint for a democratic, republic form of government. Nothing could be farther from the truth, because Plato held a rather low opinion of democracy and *Republic* paints a picture of a decidedly nondemocratic system of government as being a better system. It is quite possible that Plato may have been more than a little sarcastic when using *Republic* as a title.

Other translators and historians have noted this disparity and have traditionally assigned a subtitle—*Concerning Justice*—to this dialogue, which better conveys the work's theme. It's a broad brushstroke, which essentially covers the primary message, but it gives little credit to the many sub-dialogues taking place in *Republic* that have little to do with justice and yet are equally important.

These side conversations fulfill the role of narrative rest stops as Plato moves from one concept to another, and they also contain their own meanings by which the reader can be further enriched.

Book I: Beginning the Search for Justice

Book I begins in a very genteel way, as Plato slowly introduces us to the cast of characters who will participate in ways large and small in *Republic.* Plato takes his time here, because he knows that he has more space than usual to flesh out what he wants his characters to say. Thus, *Republic* starts out less abruptly than other dialogues, which is more comfortable for modern readers.

Having attended a festival for the goddess Bendis in the Piraeus region of Athens, Socrates and his companion Glaucon are on their way home when they're met in the street by Polemarchus and his companions (among whom is Glaucon's brother Adeimantus). Polemarchus insists that Socrates and Glaucon join them at his nearby home, and he won't take no for an answer. He apparently wants a chance to converse with the famous Socrates, and he's going to get his wish.

That Plato chose Polemarchus as a character for this dialogue is more than a little ironic. The setting for this work is well before the coming rule of the Tyrants, though it was written well afterward. When the Thirty Tyrants were set in place by

Sparta, Piraeus was home to many staunch democracy advocates who would openly and covertly oppose the Tyrants. Polemarchus himself would fund the inevitable revolution from his family's business—and would ultimately be executed for it.

Socrates, whose ideas would later be "adopted" by the ruling Thirty as justification for their actions, is welcomed into Polemarchus's home like one of the family. Plato, who never cared for the actions of the Thirty, may be making a belated statement here on their harsh brutality. Even if you disagree with one's beliefs, there is still room for civility and friendship, not barbarism.

When Socrates and Glaucon arrive at the home of Polemarchus, Socrates soon falls into a conversation with Polemarchus's father Cephalus. At first, the conversation is about old age, where Cephalus shares his experiences as an elder Athenian rather readily. Cephalus points out that, while many of his friends are lamenting the loss of their old appetites for food, sex, and other pleasures, Cephalus sees the loss of these urges as liberating:

> How well I remember the aged poet Sophocles, when in answer to the question, How does love suit with age, Sophocles, —are you still the man you were? Peace, he replied; most gladly have I escaped the thing of which you speak; I feel as if I had escaped from a mad and furious master. His words have often occurred to my mind since, and they seem as good to me now as at the time when he uttered them. For certainly old age has a great sense of calm and freedom; when the passions relax their hold, then, as Sophocles says, we are freed from the grasp not of one mad master only, but of many.

Socrates points out that many would say that old age suits Cephalus well because he is so wealthy. His riches make his mature years much more bearable than most. Cephalus denies this, lamenting that people don't believe him when he tells them his money has little to do with it:

> I might answer them as Themistocles answered the Seriphian who was abusing him and saying that he was famous, not for his own merits but because he was an Athenian: "If you had been a native of my country or I of yours, neither of us would have been famous." And to those who are not rich and are impatient of old age, the same reply may be made; for to the good poor man old age cannot be a light burden, nor can a bad rich man ever have peace with himself.

When Socrates asks Cephalus what he feels the greatest benefit of his wealth is, the older man explains that as he approaches death, niggling doubts about the afterlife haunt his mind more and more. Having wealth, he believes, is of great comfort to him, because it can help him right any injustices he may have committed toward others in the past that might adversely affect his status in the hereafter.

Immediately, Socrates picks up on the topic of justice, and begins to question his companions on what justice is. Is it truthfulness and the payment of debts as Cephalus suggests? Or is it something else? Socrates, with a quick example, points out that this may not serve as a good definition of justice:

> Suppose that a friend when in his right mind has deposited arms with me and he asks for them when he is not in his right mind, ought I to give them back to him? No one would say that I ought or that I should be right in doing so, any more than they would say that I ought always to speak the truth to one who is in his condition.

At this point in the conversation, Polemarchus steps in, and Cephalus sees this as good place to excuse himself and tend to the sacrifices. Polemarchus willingly takes up the line of conversation and tries to defend his father's definition of justice.

Socrates continues to challenge Cephalus's and Polemarchus's assertion that the payment of debt is not, alone, a proper definition of justice. (Both men, by the way, are borrowing their definition of justice from the wise man Simonides.) Polemarchus elaborates Simonides's definition of payment as giving good to those who are good and giving bad to those who are evil. This differentiation, Polemarchus asserts, is very important.

Socrates further asserts that those people who are knowledgeable and skilled at dispensing justice are also, by virtue of being savvy about justice, just as skilled at dispensing injustice. Socrates also questions Polemarchus on how we define our friends and enemies. When he gets Polemarchus to admit that we do sometimes misjudge people and, thus, it is possible to treat good people badly and bad people well, Polemarchus retreats from this assertion and tries to better define the meaning of *friend* and *enemy* as those who do good or bad to you. Socrates seems to accept this as a hypothesis, and even provides Polemarchus with a quote of the idea from another wise man:

> I believe that Periander or Perdiccas or Xerxes or Ismenias the Theban, or some other rich and mighty man, who had a great opinion of his own power, was the first to say that justice is "doing good to your friends and harm to your enemies."

At this point in the conversation, Thrasymachus jumps in. He has been listening to this discussion, which by now has drawn a crowd of listeners in the home, and has been chafing to get into the discussion himself. Now, at a pause, he approaches the two men and scornfully derides Socrates for his constant asking of questions. Indeed, Thrasymachus ridicules the whole notion of Socrates's method, and demands that he tell them, the gathered audience, what he believes justice is.

Nonplussed, Socrates (who had already seen Thrasymachus on the sidelines getting more and more irritated) begged off modestly, but Thrasymachus pressed on, telling his fellow houseguests that he knew Socrates would plead his "false modesty."

Socrates and Thrasymachus clearly don't like each other or the methods by which they try to learn and teach. In fact, when Socrates asks Thrasymachus to provide his insights, Thrasymachus refuses until he can get paid. This falls right in line with Plato's bias against the Sophists. Even after Glaucon assures Thrasymachus that he will indeed be paid, Thrasymachus still resists, stating that Socrates will just keep taking apart any definitions of justice with his constant questioning.

After a little coaxing, Thrasymachus finally and boastfully gives his explanation of justice: "I proclaim that justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger." Socrates immediately starts trying to get Thrasymachus to define this statement more completely. Is justice what the stronger thinks is good? In that case, what if the stronger is wrong and makes a mistake? Thrasymachus replies, trading insults with Socrates along the way, that because they are the stronger, they won't make mistakes.

Socrates is likely fairly happy with Thrasymachus's attitude by now, and we start to see some of the crafty fire in his next line of reasoning. Describing the works of artists and craftsmen, Socrates asserts that they're actually more concerned with doing good to the things they create, not to themselves. The implication here is that a ruler would also have that outward focus.

Thrasymachus tries to argue this point, indicating that the shepherd does not have the good of the sheep in mind when he cares for them. Ultimately, he will want to shear them and eat them, which does the sheep no good at all. In fact, he adds (in a rather long discourse), if Socrates had any sense at all, he would realize that the unjust are always getting more than the just in any given situation.

Thrasymachus tries to leave at this point, perhaps to escape the inevitable Socratic questions and, thus, have the last word, but Socrates and the others won't let him go. Socrates goes back to the shepherd analogy that Thrasymachus brought up and gets Thrasymachus to agree that the shepherd actually can have two interests in mind as he does his job: the short-term concern for the sheep and the long-term concern for his job.

Socrates leads Thrasymachus and the rest of his audience down a slightly different path, suggesting that because practitioners of a given art ultimately do not do themselves any good, then it must follow that the best rulers will be those who are most reluctant to rule. If they do their job right, they will not receive good anyway, so why expect it?

As he continues to argue with Thrasymachus, Socrates puts out three theories on what a just man is. First, he maintains that the just are good and wise and the

unjust evil and ignorant. He then also stipulates that injustice, by its very nature, creates all sorts of problems and is ultimately not very efficient. Finally, he concludes that the just are capable of living a better life than the unjust.

When Thrasymachus, who has calmed down a bit, congratulates Socrates on his discoveries, Socrates laments that, although they have approached better definitions of what the just and unjust do, they still don't know what justice *is,* or whether it is more or less profitable than injustice. With this statement hanging in the air, Book I ends.

Book II: A City of Justice

Socrates thinks he is finished, but Glaucon is not satisfied with the conclusion of the argument. He feels Thrasymachus gave up too easily, and he endeavors to pick up where the Sophist left off, albeit in a more constructive manner. He proposes to give a speech arguing against justice and then let Socrates give a speech advocating justice.

Glaucon then launches into a lengthy and well-reasoned continuation of Thrasymachus's earlier line of reasoning of why injustice is something that is easier to obtain than justice. Justice, he argues, is actually something that is gained more through compromise than anything else.

Glaucon also asserts that justice must have some compulsory nature. Given the same circumstances, a just man and an unjust man will eventually end up doing the exact same things. He even relates the tale of an ancestor of Gynes the Lydian, a shepherd who found himself with a ring that could render him invisible. When he deduced the power of the ring, the shepherd eventually used it to kill his king and take over his kingdom. Glaucon argues that any man who finds himself in a similar situation would eventually want to take such abuses. Therefore, justice must be something involuntary and compulsory that prevents such things from happening all the time.

He also states that people seek justice for only its rewards, and these rewards can be obtained by only maintaining the appearance of justice or injustice. How people behave is a far stronger determinant than how they fundamentally are.

When Glaucon finishes, Socrates is all ready to answer him, but Adeimantus feels compelled to jump in and back up his brother's arguments with some assertions of his own. Adeimantus wants to make two more points to bolster Glaucon's case, and Socrates is very happy to let him.

Justice, Adeimantus maintains, is something that is sought out for its ultimate rewards—not necessarily simply for being just:

> Parents and tutors are always telling their sons and their wards that they are to be just; but why? not for the sake of justice, but for the sake of character and

> reputation; in the hope of obtaining for him who is reputed just some of those offices, marriages, and the like which Glaucon has enumerated among the advantages accruing to the unjust from the reputation of justice. More, however, is made of appearances by this class of persons than by the others; for they throw in the good opinion of the gods, and will tell you of a shower of benefits which the heavens, as they say, rain upon the pious.

Not only that, Adeimantus states, but justice is also characterized as something that is separate from the concept of happiness, because dispensing and receiving justice are at once both happy and unhappy events, depending on one's perspective.

Adeimantus cites these as two popular opinions of justice, and wonders aloud to Socrates and the gathering if these characterizations are having a negative impact on the youth of Athens (not knowing, within the context of this dialogue, that this is a charge that will be leveled at Socrates later with much more serious consequences).

As the narrator, Socrates reveals that his high opinion of these two brothers has only been increased by their statements, for they were well-reasoned and without the egoism that peppers other interlocutors' arguments. They have done such a good job, Socrates says, that he is unsure of where to begin to defend justice. But he surely must defend her, because it is justice.

Socrates proposes that instead of focusing tightly on justice at the individual level, he be allowed to widen his focus and instead describe justice within a city. He believes that, after establishing the meaning of justice within this analogy, he will be able to apply it to the individual. The group agrees, and thus the beginnings of the political slant to *Republic* begin.

To begin, Socrates sets up what is probably a traditional model of a city, with all the motivations and drives of a typical city. With Adeimantus and Glaucon, Socrates creates a hypothetical city with tradesmen, craftsmen, and—eventually—all the possible citizenry such a city would need. But, after building this city construct, Socrates asks the most relevant question in his mind:

> [Socrates] And now, Adeimantus, is our State matured and perfected?
>
> [Adeimantus] I think so.
>
> [Socrates] Where, then, is justice, and where is injustice, and in what part of the State did they spring up?
>
> [Adeimantus] Probably in the dealings of these citizens with one another. [I] cannot imagine that they are more likely to be found anywhere else.
>
> [Socrates] I dare say that you are right in your suggestion, I said; we had better think the matter out, and not shrink from the enquiry.

Glaucon interrupts here and states that he believes that the city as they describe it is really not that civilized—has Socrates forgotten the art of gourmet cooking in his model? Perhaps Glaucon is hungry, but it does give Socrates an excellent opportunity to change the premise of his city. This city will not be a typical Greek city, but something truly hypothetical—a city of luxury.

Such a city would have even greater needs for goods and services, as well as land to maintain its way of life. Some of these resources, particularly the land, may have to be taken from others who are using the land themselves. This, then, the group reasons, may be the origin of war.

To keep others from stealing what they have, the city will need to have an army to protect it. This army would have to be something that was at the time a foreign idea; it would have to be, in order to be really good, a professional, standing army. This was unlike anything the Greeks had practiced. When wars were fought, freemen and slaves would be encouraged or pressed into service to fight for the duration of the conflict. After the war was over, they would go home to their former lives. Socrates's suggestion was that his mythical, luxurious city would be protected by a dedicated force of men with no other jobs than to be in the army.

In his conversation with Glaucon, Socrates further reasons that, because a great army is apt to be aggressive and combative, something must be done to prevent such aggression from being directed at themselves and the citizenry of the city. Such a requirement would mean that this army would have to be highly educated, so they could act with wisdom toward whomever they were dealing with. If they were educated properly, these guardians might be the very agents of justice and injustice this hypothetical city needs. But now a new question is revealed:

> [Socrates] Then he who is to be a really good and noble guardian of the State will require to unite in himself philosophy and spirit and swiftness and strength?
>
> [Glaucon] Undoubtedly.
>
> [Socrates] Then we have found the desired natures; and now that we have found them, how are they to be reared and educated? Is not this enquiry which may be expected to throw light on the greater enquiry which is our final end —How do justice and injustice grow up in States? For we do not want either to omit what is to the point or to draw out the argument to an inconvenient length.

Faced with the daunting task of educating these civic guardians, the group turns its attention to the job.

Socrates proposes that in order to build a better foundation, topics such as music and poetry should be taught before physical and combat training. His companions

agree but give pause when Socrates starts to ask whether they agree that music and poetry are all part of the storytelling arts and that, like any story, there are stories that are true and those that are false.

Adeimantus agrees, perhaps not knowing where Socrates is leading him. It soon becomes clear when Socrates advocates that in order for the guardians of the city to be taught properly, they should only have the "good" stories delivered to them, not the bad. The storytellers should be monitored and allowed to relate only the positive stories.

Because, in these times, most stories (and music and art) were directly related to the gods, it further became necessary to censor worship as well, Socrates continued. Only the "right" gods should be worshipped and even then, only the stories that related their positive aspects should be told.

To many in Western society, such a restriction is appalling, but remember, this is ancient Greece. Freedom of expression was allowed—until one angered the State, and then all bets were off. Thus, Socrates's suggestion was perfectly viable to the men he was speaking to.

The city's approved gods would have to remain constant as well, to maintain a moral center for its citizens. As one of the city's "founders," Socrates successfully argues that these ideals be mandated as laws for the city, with strong punishments if not followed, which ends Book II:

> [Socrates] These are the kind of sentiments about the gods which will arouse our anger; and he who utters them shall be refused a chorus; neither shall we allow teachers to make use of them in the instruction of the young, meaning, as we do, that our guardians, as far as men can be, should be true worshippers of the gods and like them.
>
> [Glaucon] I entirely agree, he said, in these principles, and promise to make them my laws.

Book III: Educating the Guardians

Book III of *Republic* is really a straightforward continuation of Book II, where Socrates and his companions go on with their debate on how to educate the guardians of their hypothetical city, which is quickly shaping up to be a Utopian-like environment.

When Socrates polls his companions, they quickly draw up a list of the kinds of stories that they would allow the guardians to hear. Only stories that told of courage

would be told, and certainly no stories about "weepings and wailings of famous men." Nor would there be any stories with excessive humor on the part of the gods, because that usually led to mischief. Temperance is another area that stories should focus upon, Socrates suggests.

Socrates also proposes an interesting suggestion on stories highlighting truth. The average citizen should not be allowed to hear tales showing the value of lies. Only truth should be advocated for them. But for the guardians of the city, a different standard applies. The guardians and their rulers should know how to lie—to the city's enemies and even to the citizens if need be. Only rulers, Socrates maintains, should be allowed to lie.

After running through this list of approved topics, the group turns to figuring out how these stories should be presented. Socrates spends a bit of time teaching Adeimantus and the rest of his listeners about the differences between straightforward narrative and imitative narrative. His point here, it seems, is to advocate one form or the other and not a mix of the two methods in any tale or poem. These requirements also would apply to musical forms.

Socrates spends a lot of time focusing on musical and artistic education, and eventually reveals how important he believes it is within the context of a proper overall education:

> [Socrates] And therefore, I said, Glaucon, musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful; and also because he who has received this true education of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature, and with a true taste, while he praises and rejoices over and receives into his soul the good, and becomes noble and good, he will justly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why; and when reason comes he will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar.
>
> [Glaucon] Yes, he said, I quite agree with you in thinking that our youth should be trained in music and on the grounds which you mention.
>
> [Socrates] Just as in learning to read, I said, we were satisfied when we knew the letters of the alphabet, which are very few, in all their recurring sizes and combinations; not slighting them as unimportant whether they occupy a space large or small, but everywhere eager to make them out; and not thinking ourselves perfect in the art of reading until we recognize them wherever they are found:
>
> [Glaucon] True.

[Socrates] Or, as we recognize the reflection of letters in the water, or in a mirror, only when we know the letters themselves; the same art and study giving us the knowledge of both:

[Glaucon] Exactly—

[Socrates] Even so, as I maintain, neither we nor our guardians, whom we have to educate, can ever become musical until we and they know the essential forms, in all their combinations, and can recognize them and their images wherever they are found, not slighting them either in small things or great, but believing them all to be within the sphere of one art and study.

When these guidelines have been established, Socrates moves on to focus on physical education for the guardians. Their diets should be, like the rest of their education, simple and austere. Doctors and medicine should only be utilized when necessary.

Next, Socrates asks the group how this city's rulers should be selected. He has some ideas of his own, which he presents to his audience:

[Socrates] There can be no doubt that the elder must rule the younger.

[Glaucon] Clearly.

[Socrates] And that the best of these must rule.

[Glaucon] That is also clear.

[Socrates] Now, are not the best husbandmen those who are most devoted to husbandry?

[Glaucon] Yes.

[Socrates] And as we are to have the best of guardians for our city, must they not be those who have most the character of guardians?

[Glaucon] Yes.

[Socrates] And to this end they ought to be wise and efficient, and to have a special care of the State?

[Glaucon] True.

[Socrates] And a man will be most likely to care about that which he loves?

[Glaucon] To be sure.

[Socrates] And he will be most likely to love that which he regards as having the same interests with himself, and that of which the good or evil fortune is supposed by him at any time most to affect his own?

> [Glaucon] Very true, he replied.
>
> [Socrates] Then there must be a selection. Let us note among the guardians those who in their whole life show the greatest eagerness to do what is for the good of their country, and the greatest repugnance to do what is against her interests.

Socrates outlines a series of tests, both physical and mental, that will properly determine the rulers from among the guardians. After these are fleshed out to his satisfaction, he then moves on to create a very elaborate origin legend to help enforce the rulers', guardians', and citizens' places in society.

The group likes the legend, though they are not sure how it will stand up over the test of time as new generations are born. Socrates suggests another method of maintaining social stratification: forbidding the guardians private property. This is an extension of his ideas about a purely professional army.

If the guardians were to become landowners and holders of property, then they would immediately be distracted from what should be their sole vocation. They would also become embroiled in the internal politics of the city, and therefore vulnerable to all the problems that entails. Better, Socrates argues at the end of Book III, to keep the guardians separate.

Book IV: The City as Soul

The initial dialogue in Book IV finishes up the modeling of the city. After hearing the seemingly harsh strictures placed on the guardians, Adeimantus objects, wondering how they would ever be happy under such living conditions.

Socrates replies that it's not important that one part of the society they're describing is made happy—what matters is the happiness of the city as a whole. If everyone is happy at the same time, the city effectively becomes one great big party, with no one getting anything constructive accomplished.

In fact, Socrates advocates, in order to keep this from happening, wealth will need to be limited in the city and so, too, will the size and population of the city, though for slightly different reasons. If there is too much wealth, then the population will be apt to start getting lazy. If there is too much size, then there is a danger that the city will become factionalized as different social groups get large enough that they feel able to split off from the rest of the city. Above all, Socrates emphasizes, education must be the primary directive for the guardians:

> [Socrates] The regulations which we are prescribing, my good Adeimantus, are not, as might be supposed, a number of great principles, but trifles all, if care be

taken, as the saying is, of the one great thing, —a thing, however, which I would rather call, not great, but sufficient for our purpose.

[Adeimantus] What may that be? he asked.

[Socrates] Education, I said, and nurture: If our citizens are well educated, and grow into sensible men, they will easily see their way through all these, as well as other matters which I omit; such, for example, as marriage, the possession of women and the procreation of children, which will all follow the general principle that friends have all things in common, as the proverb says.

When the discussion turns more toward the general behavior of the youth as they're being educated, Socrates actually inserts a note of caution. The city's government should not spend a lot of time fretting about trivial rules such as manner of dress or hairstyles or proper manners. In these, and many other areas of society, the rulers should try to refrain from an overabundance of laws.

Finally, the city's traditions and culture should be maintained by the religious leaders in the society, not by the city's rulers themselves. Socrates is, in this, consistent with his belief that the city's government should be focused on one job alone.

By now, the model of the ideal city has been completed to the group's satisfaction. Now, according to Socrates, the real work begins:

[Socrates] But where, amid all this, is justice? son of Ariston, tell me where. Now that our city has been made habitable, light a candle and search, and get your brother and Polemarchus and the rest of our friends to help, and let us see where in it we can discover justice and where injustice, and in what they differ from one another, and which of them the man who would be happy should have for his portion, whether seen or unseen by gods and men.

[Glaucon] Nonsense, said Glaucon: did you not promise to search yourself, saying that for you not to help justice in her need would be an impiety?

[Socrates] I do not deny that I said so, and as you remind me, I will be as good as my word; but you must join.

After over two books' worth of discussion, Socrates is now ready to lead the group back to its original goal: the search for justice. Recall from Book II, the intent was to create a scenario where justice could be found in a city, and thereby apply it to the individual.

It is important to note that the city is broadly analogous to a human being. But many scholars have interpreted the analogy to be a bit finer: The city is a representation of the human soul. By Socrates's definition, the city—and thus, the soul—is

ultimately composed of four characteristics: It "is therefore wise and valiant and temperate and just."

Socrates proposes a subtractive method of determining what is just in the city, by determining what is wise, valiant, and temperate first. Whatever is left over, he concludes, will be justice. The city's wisdom, he opines, is held by the city's rulers. The valiant nature is held by the guardians. Its temperance is found, Socrates says, in the willingness of the citizens to remain under the rule of those who are most qualified to rule. So what, then, is justice?

Through this section of the dialogue, Socrates has been leading his fellows through the search for these qualities as a hunter might lead a group of huntsmen. With more than a little imagination and humor, he brings his merry band toward the ultimate goal.

> [Socrates] The time then has arrived, Glaucon, when, like huntsmen, we should surround the cover, and look sharp that justice does not steal away, and pass out of sight and escape us; for beyond a doubt she is somewhere in this country: watch therefore and strive to catch a sight of her, and if you see her first, let me know.
>
> [Glaucon] Would that I could! But you should regard me rather as a follower who has just eyes enough to see what you show him—that is about as much as I am good for.
>
> [Socrates] Offer up a prayer with me and follow.
>
> [Glaucon] I will, but you must show me the way.
>
> [Socrates] Here is no path, I said, and the wood is dark and perplexing; still we must push on.
>
> [Glaucon] Let us push on.
>
> [Socrates] Here I saw something: Halloo! I said, I begin to perceive a track, and I believe that the quarry will not escape.
>
> [Glaucon] Good news, he said.
>
> [Socrates] Truly, I said, we are stupid fellows.
>
> [Glaucon] Why so?
>
> [Socrates] Why, my good sir, at the beginning of our enquiry, ages ago, there was justice tumbling out at our feet, and we never saw her; nothing could be more ridiculous. Like people who go about looking for what they have in their hands—that was the way with us—we looked not at what we were seeking, but at what was far off in the distance; and therefore, I suppose, we missed her.

[Glaucon] What do you mean?

[Socrates] I mean to say that in reality for a long time past we have been talking of justice, and have failed to recognize her.

[Glaucon] I grow impatient at the length of your exordium.

[Socrates] Well then, tell me, I said, whether I am right or not: You remember the original principle which we were always laying down at the foundation of the State, that one man should practice one thing only, the thing to which his nature was best adapted; —now justice is this principle or a part of it.

[Glaucon] Yes, we often said that one man should do one thing only.

[Socrates] Further, we affirmed that justice was doing one's own business, and not being a busybody; we said so again and again, and many others have said the same to us.

[Glaucon] Yes, we said so.

[Socrates] Then to do one's own business in a certain way may be assumed to be justice.

In a funny, roundabout way, Socrates is describing justice as the ability of each member of the society to perform his or her proper function. If a carpenter remains a good carpenter, a ruler a good ruler, and so on, then all is fair and just.

Now comes the tricky part—the successful transposition of the characteristics of the city to those of the human soul. If, Socrates maintains, they can discover a one-to-one relationship between the characteristics of the two, then they will have succeeded in determining what justice is.

The first set of inquiries in this search is to determine whether the three classes of the city—rulers, guardians, and citizens—have an equivalent three functions within the soul. Socrates believes there are three such functions: the rational, the spiritual, and the desiring elements.

After spending a bit of time establishing that these three elements of the soul correspond to the three classes of the city, Socrates is then able to make the statement that for the soul, the ability to keep these three aspects in their proper place, performing their proper functions, is the best description of justice. When any one aspect of the soul moves beyond its boundaries, to excess, then injustice will clearly be the result.

Satisfied that they have indeed found the best definitions of justice and injustice, Socrates tries to go back to the original question of which one is more profitable. Glaucon immediately asserts that the whole question is pointless by now,

because, if injustice represents the manifestation of an unbalanced soul, it is obvious that injustice is something to be avoided, regardless of the short-term rewards.

Socrates is reluctant to abandon the question so quickly; to him, the city they just finished describing only represents one form of government: a monarchy or aristocracy, depending on the number of rulers. To him, because of the unified structure of the ruler's (or rulers') education, to distinguish them as separate forms of state is unnecessary—they're one form among a total of five.

What distinguished their city is that it represents the one virtuous state in the midst of four others, which represent special vices. And, like the city, Socrates asserts that there are five kinds of human soul—one type filled with virtue and four with vice.

How justice and injustice function in their modeled virtuous city may not be the same in the other types of government, so Socrates proposes that they examine the other four unjust, vice-ridden types of state (and the four corresponding types of the soul) to get a better perspective.

Book V: Refining the City Model

In a tidy literary move, Plato decides to postpone this line of reasoning for a while. The examination of the unjust societies will not take place until Book VIII, as Plato has his characters further refine the model of the city they've created.

In the meantime, Glaucon and Adeimantus begin a whispered conversation off to the side, which attracts Socrates's attention. It seems something that he said during the construction of the city is still bothering them, which Adeimantus voices first:

> [Socrates] Yes, he said; but what is right in this particular case, like everything else, requires to be explained; for community may be of many kinds. Please, therefore, to say what sort of community you mean. We have been long expecting that you would tell us something about the family life of your citizens — how they will bring children into the world, and rear them when they have arrived, and, in general, what is the nature of this community of women and children—for we are of opinion that the right or wrong management of such matters will have a great and paramount influence on the State for good or for evil. And now, since the question is still undetermined, and you are taking in hand another State, we have resolved, as you heard, not to let you go until you give an account of all this.
>
> [Glaucon] To that resolution, said Glaucon, you may regard me as saying Agreed.
>
> [Thrasymachus] And without more ado, said Thrasymachus, you may consider us all to be equally agreed.

> [Socrates] I said, You know not what you are doing in thus assailing me: What an argument are you raising about the State! Just as I thought that I had finished, and was only too glad that I had laid this question to sleep, and was reflecting how fortunate I was in your acceptance of what I then said, you ask me to begin again at the very foundation, ignorant of what a hornet's nest of words you are stirring. Now I foresaw this gathering trouble, and avoided it.

Apparently, this whole notion of holding things in common is still troubling Socrates's companions, for they don't understand how such a state would function, particularly when taking women and children into account. Socrates, who seems to have wanted to move on, is distracted by the side argument but nonetheless agrees, albeit grudgingly, to help explain the model in more detail.

Reluctantly, Socrates puts forth the idea that in the guardian class, the women should be treated exactly the same as the men. Faced with the natural resistance of this idea from the men of his culture, since women in ancient Greece had very little rights outside of the home, Socrates argues that not only is this solution necessary, it is also a better way to maintain the guardian class.

Given Athenian opinions of women, he has to spend quite a bit of time convincing this group that this is a good idea. When the (to them) natural arguments come up that women are weaker than men, and far different from men, Socrates defends his position by asserting that in the end, if all guardians regardless of gender are given exactly the same education, then the differences will not matter. A proper education, Socrates believes, is enough to smooth out any natural strengths or weaknesses between the genders.

Addressing the notion of childrearing in this city, Socrates again focuses on the guardian class, because the way they live should, in his view, extend out to the other classes. The guardians, he believes, should not maintain separate families, but should rather live a communal form of existence. There should be no husband/wife pairings, and all children should belong to all adults.

Again, Socrates has to spend quite a bit of time in the dialogue explaining how this will all work, and goes into some detail as to the breeding and sexual logistics of such a system. By the time he finishes, the gathering of men has no trouble agreeing with the unifying power of such an arrangement, as the guardians will certainly be happy.

The discussion then goes on to examine how the guardians will conduct a war, and Socrates offers quite a few ideas on how such activities will take place. Eventually, though, Glaucon grinds the conversation to a halt:

> [Glaucon] But still I must say, Socrates, that if you are allowed to go on in this way you will entirely forget the other question which at the commencement of

> this discussion you thrust aside: —Is such an order of things possible, and how, if at all? For I am quite ready to acknowledge that the plan which you propose, if only feasible, would do all sorts of good to the State. I will add, what you have omitted, that your citizens will be the bravest of warriors, and will never leave their ranks, for they will all know one another, and each will call the other father, brother, son; and if you suppose the women to join their armies, whether in the same rank or in the rear, either as a terror to the enemy, or as auxiliaries in case of need, I know that they will then be absolutely invincible; and there are many domestic advantages which might also be mentioned and which I also fully acknowledge: but, as I admit all these advantages and as many more as you please, if only this State of yours were to come into existence, we need say no more about them; assuming then the existence of the State, let us now turn to the question of possibility and ways and means—the rest may be left.
>
> [Socrates] If I loiter for a moment, you instantly make a raid upon me, I said, and have no mercy; I have hardly escaped the first and second waves, and you seem not to be aware that you are now bringing upon me the third, which is the greatest and heaviest. When you have seen and heard the third wave, I think you [will] be more considerate and will acknowledge that some fear and hesitation was natural respecting a proposal so extraordinary as that which I have now to state and investigate.
>
> [Glaucon] The more appeals of this sort which you make, he said, the more determined are we that you shall tell us how such a State is possible: speak out and at once.

This literary device may be of great use, because it seems that these men could go on all night hypothesizing about the nature of their city. Glaucon, it seems, is thinking past the conversation and is more interested in how such a city could ever exist.

Socrates reminds him that this hypothetical city has already proven to be of some use—after all, it got them to the answer of justice and injustice, didn't it? Glaucon agrees, and Socrates obliges him by putting forth the only way he can see such a society to come into existence.

> [Socrates] I said: Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils, —nor the human race, as I believe, —and then only will this our State have a possibility of life and behold the light of day. Such was the thought, my dear Glaucon, which I would fain have uttered if it had not seemed too extravagant;

> for to be convinced that in no other State can there be happiness private or public is indeed a hard thing.

His fellow houseguests are more than a little skeptical; Glaucon is in shock at the suggestion. But after defining what philosophy is, Socrates gets the group to agree that such men are the best keepers of wisdom any society could have. At this, Book V ends, still leaving Socrates the task to convince them that philosopher-kings would be the ideal rulers for such a society.

Book VI: The Search for a Philosopher-King

The next book continues right where Book V left off, with Socrates asserting that, because of the superior nature of a philosopher's wisdom, he is the perfect person for all citizens of their just society to have as a leader.

But now the problem remains: What kind of philosopher should be placed in this position? First and foremost, these learned men should have experience not only in all things philosophical, but also in practical matters. The philosopher should possess strong virtues as well, such as a love of knowledge, and an active practice of truth, temperance, courage, strength, and wisdom. These are among the traits Socrates lists as important to what such a person's character should be.

The problem, Adeimantus interjects, is that no philosopher he can think of would ever fill this bill:

> Here Adeimantus interposed and said: To these statements, Socrates, no one can offer a reply; but when you talk in this way, a strange feeling passes over the minds of your hearers: They fancy that they are led astray a little at each step in the argument, owing to their own want of skill in asking and answering questions; these little accumulate, and at the end of the discussion they are found to have sustained a mighty overthrow and all their former notions appear to be turned upside down. And as unskillful players of draughts are at last shut up by their more skilful adversaries and have no piece to move, so they too find themselves shut up at last; for they have nothing to say in this new game of which words are the counters; and yet all the time they are in the right. The observation is suggested to me by what is now occurring. For any one of us might say, that although in words he is not able to meet you at each step of the argument, he sees as a fact that the votaries of philosophy, when they carry on the study, not only in youth as a part of education, but as the pursuit of their mature years, most of them become strange monsters, not to say utter rogues, and that those

> who may be considered the best of them are made useless to the world by the very study which you extol.

Socrates counters that it is not philosophers who are the problem—there are many excellent philosophers out there. Instead, it is actually the fault of a society that can't properly deal with such men that is the problem. He then launches into a lengthy explanation of why this so. Essentially, by their very nature—their ability to look beyond the literal world and deal with things as they are and not as they appear to be—philosophers tend to be abrasive to the society in which they live. (Socrates is no longer referring to his hypothetical city now—he's talking about the real world.)

Another obstacle to philosophers' acceptance in society is the profusion of false philosophers who only parrot what the public wants to hear (Sophists, Socrates reiterates, fall into this category). Such men are likely to be liked, but in terms of an impact on the society around them, they usually do very little.

Socrates does propose a potential solution to this problem of philosophical acceptance. Don't train young men in their adolescence about the ways of the mind and watch them give up in frustration the first time they're seriously challenged. Instead, educate them in philosophy when they're older, after they've lived the fullness of their lives. Let the elderly take up the mantle of the philosophers and lend their life experiences to their training. This, coupled with their societal respect, would make them powerful forces.

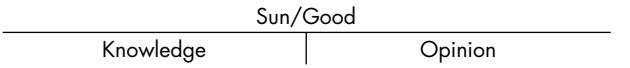
Having answered most of his interlocutors' objections, Socrates turns to the question of how such philosophers should be educated. Socrates draws upon much of the earlier educational requirements he outlined for the guardians as a basis for the training of the philosopher-kings, but he stresses a most important part of the training.

> [Adeimantus] A right noble thought; but do you suppose that we shall refrain from asking you what is this highest knowledge?
>
> [Socrates] Nay, I said, ask if you will; but I am certain that you have heard the answer many times, and now you either do not understand me or, as I rather think, you are disposed to be troublesome; for you have of[ten] been told that the idea of good is the highest knowledge, and that all other things become useful and advantageous only by their use of this. You can hardly be ignorant that of this I was about to speak, concerning which, as you have often heard me say, we know so little; and, without which, any other knowledge or possession of any kind will profit us nothing. Do you think that the possession of all other things is of any value if we do not possess the good? Or the knowledge of all other things if we have no knowledge of beauty and goodness?

Socrates then constructs three analogies, two of which are presented here in this book, describing the nature of good. The first analogy is that of the Sun, where good is described not as sight, but as the light the Sun provides so that the eyes can see the world.

His second analogy is even more abstract, and here Plato really starts to use the mathematical principles he learned while in Sicily. It is also the basis for his Theory of Forms, which appears in *Republic* and in other, later dialogues. The line is an important analogy because, although it is intended to show the nature of good, it also delivers a powerful model for the cognitive abilities of a human being. The analogy of the line builds upon the previous analogy of the Sun, where the Sun is Good shining down on all the realms that Plato, through Socrates, describes with the line.

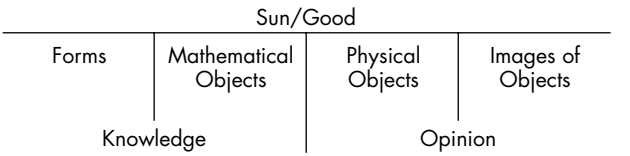
Socrates describes a line dividing two realms, the realm of what is known and what is opinion. Over both of these realms is the Sun-like Good. The line is represented in this diagram by the vertical line in the center of the figure.



In the realm of opinion, there are two types of things that are perceived: actual, physical objects and images of physical objects (such as shadows or reflections). These are taken as opinion because they are things we believe we see, not things that are actually known to be absolutely true.

In the realm of knowledge are the two groups that are absolutely true, no matter who is perceiving them: mathematical objects (which include geometric absolutes, axioms, and hypotheses) and universal forms, such as virtue, justice, and the absolute true nature of the universe.

With this in mind, the diagram can be modified to include the new subgroups.

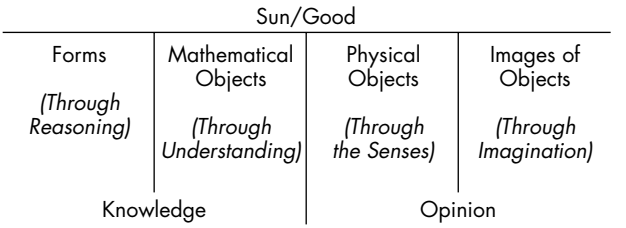


It is a little counterintuitive to think of physical objects and their reflections as opinion. Indeed, even Glaucon had trouble understanding it as Socrates was explaining it to him. By opinion, Socrates is referring to that which is *perceived* and

interpreted by our senses. Physical objects, therefore, are directly perceived by our physical senses. Images of objects, Socrates argued, are perceived by the imagination.

Things in the knowledge realm are not perceived, they are known. But the methods of obtaining that knowledge vary depending on the object. The nature of mathematical objects is discovered through understanding, while forms are known through reasoning, such as the dialectic reasoning that Socrates and Plato are so fond of.

With these different perceptive methods in mind, the line now can be described like this:



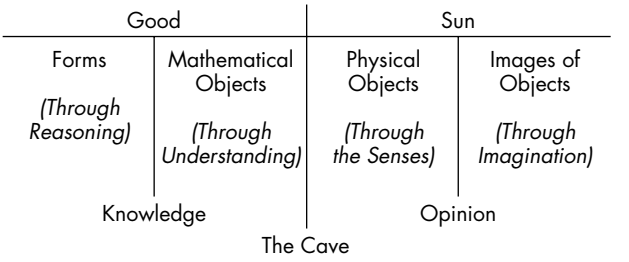
The analogies of the Sun and the line are very important to remember, as they will soon be used by Plato within the most famous Platonic analogy of all: the Analogy of the Cave.

Book VII: Rising Out of the Cave

When Book VII begins, Socrates is continuing his explanation of how the philosopher-king needs to be educated. He immediately starts to describe a long, dark cave, which is analogous to the boundaries society places on the soul of the individual.

Deep within the cave is where many people exist, bound by the strictures society has placed on their knowledge, virtue, and sense of the universe around them. Education, Socrates asserts, is the key to getting out of this cave. The more education someone acquires, the more knowledge he obtains. And the more knowledge someone has, the closer he is to achieving true good.

The previous analogy of the line can be adapted slightly to show this path from the darkness of ignorance to the light of good. Instead of showing the Sun and Good as equal analogous objects, we directly assign the Sun to shine on the realm of the physical, and Good to enlighten the realm of knowledge. If these two objects at the top of the chart represent the light at the mouth of the cave, then we can add a simple illustration to represent the dark of the cave.



Getting from the bottom of the cave (at the bottom of the chart) to the top is a matter of going through one of the four paths represented by the knowledge and opinion groups. But, because the Sun is at the top of the realm of opinion, getting to Good through an increased perception of physical objects or their images is not going to work.

Instead, Socrates reasons, a philosopher-king can rise up from the cave through the knowledge gained from education. He can rise up through understanding mathematical concepts and ideas, or through dialectic reasoning about forms, or both. As he continues to learn, he will move toward the entrance of the cave.

Socrates spends a great deal of time in Book VII examining the different branches of mathematics, such as planar and solid geometry, astronomy, and harmonics. He also tries to define the dialectic form of learning but doesn't quite hit the mark:

> And so, Glaucon, I said, we have at last arrived at the hymn of dialectic. This is that strain which is of the intellect only, but which the faculty of sight will nevertheless be found to imitate; for sight, as you may remember, was imagined by us after a while to behold the real animals and stars, and last of all the sun himself. And so with dialectic; when a person starts on the discovery of the absolute by the light of reason only, and without any assistance of sense, and perseveres until by pure intelligence he arrives at the perception of the absolute good, he at last finds himself at the end of the intellectual world, as in the case of sight at the end of the visible.

After Socrates has described, or tried to describe, the methods through which the philosopher-king can reach Good, he emphasizes that this person will have to ultimately go back into the cave in order to teach and rule over his subjects. This is the burden and privilege of such a leader, who presumably will be able to bring some of that light back into the cave with him, like a torch.

Glaucon and the rest seem more at ease with the model of government and society in their hypothetical city (which they have now christened Callipolis). Socrates

details the order in which these subjects should be taught to the future kings and describes how such a system could be brought into being:

> [Socrates] They will begin by sending out into the country all the inhabitants of the city who are more than ten years old, and will take possession of their children, who will be unaffected by the habits of their parents; these they will train in their own habits and laws, I mean in the laws which we have given them: and in this way the State and constitution of which we were speaking will soonest and most easily attain happiness, and the nation which has such a constitution will gain most.
>
> [Glaucon] Yes, that will be the best way. And I think, Socrates, that you have very well described how, if ever, such a constitution might come into being.
>
> [Socrates] Enough then of the perfect State, and of the man who bears its image—there is no difficulty in seeing how we shall describe him.
>
> [Glaucon] There is no difficulty, he replied; and I agree with you in thinking that nothing more need be said.

But, of course, this model is only one of five societal models Socrates proposes, and at the beginning of Book VIII, he picks up that line once again.

Book VIII: Beyond Callipolis

Socrates, with the help of the prodigious memory of Glaucon, gets the group back to the line of thinking he was about to embark upon before being interrupted by Adeimantus and Polemarchus. Glaucon repeats word for word where they were in the conversation before they digressed, and then presses Socrates to hear more about the four regimes Socrates was about to mention. Socrates replies:

> That question, I said, is easily answered: the four governments of which I spoke, so far as they have distinct names, are, first, those of Crete and Sparta, which are generally applauded; what is termed oligarchy comes next; this is not equally approved, and is a form of government which teems with evils: thirdly, democracy, which naturally follows oligarchy, although very different: and lastly comes tyranny, great and famous, which differs from them all, and is the fourth and worst disorder of a State. I do not know, do you? of any other constitution which can be said to have a distinct character. There are lordships and principalities which are bought and sold, and some other intermediate forms of government. But these are nondescripts and may be found equally among Hellenes and among barbarians.

Glaucon agrees with these definitions, for the most part, and Socrates reiterates why examining these four unjust societies (along with the one just Callipoian society) is so crucial:

> [Socrates] Do you know, I said, that governments vary as the dispositions of men vary, and that there must be as many of the one as there are of the other? For we cannot suppose that States are made of "oak and rock," and not out of the human natures which are in them, and which in a figure turn the scale and draw other things after them?
>
> [Glaucon] Yes, he said, the States are as the men are; they grow out of human characters.
>
> [Socrates] Then if the constitutions of States are five, the dispositions of individual minds will also be five?

After revealing the most unjust of these societies, and then comparing with the just one they have just modeled, the group should be able to determine which profits a man more: justice or injustice. Socrates begins with a look at the Spartan aristocracy, which he actually prefers to call a timocracy, or honor-loving regime. By his definition, a *timocracy* is something that is a natural outgrowth of a pure aristocracy, because such a society places value on honor above many other characteristics.

Essentially, the Spartan form of government falls under this description, which is essentially halfway between an aristocracy and an oligarchy, in Socrates's opinion. Individuals in such a society become timocratic when they reason that the only way to obtain power is through honor, and the only way to get honor is through power. This, the whole society's hierarchy is based not on the pursuit of good, but on the pursuit of honor. Such a man's soul would be constructed like this, Socrates explains:

> The result is that the young man, hearing and seeing all these thing[s]—hearing too, the words of his father, and having a nearer view of his way of life, and making comparisons of him and others—is drawn opposite ways: while his father is watering and nourishing the rational principle in his soul, the others are encouraging the passionate and appetitive; and he being not originally of a bad nature, but having kept bad company, is at last brought by their joint influence to a middle point, and gives up the kingdom which is within him to the middle principle of contentiousness and passion, and becomes arrogant and ambitious.

An *oligarchy,* the rule of a very few over many, accurately describes the rule of the Thirty Tyrants, which (in this dialogue) is yet to come. Plato, writing this many years later, probably knew full well whose government he was describing.

Socrates adds a bit more to the definition of *oligarchy.* He explains that it also has much to do with the acquisition of property. The more property one has, the more powerful one becomes. In such a society, a citizen's character might be constructed in this manner:

> And surely, the miser individually will be an ignoble competitor in a State for any prize of victory, or other object of honourable ambition; he will not spend his money in the contest for glory; so afraid is he of awakening his expensive appetites and inviting them to help and join in the struggle; in true oligarchical fashion he fights with a small part only of his resources, and the result commonly is that he loses the prize and saves his money.

Next, Socrates shifts his attention to a democracy. Here, the citizens are allowed to rule themselves. But because of the lack of social and political boundaries, it is anyone's guess how a citizen in such a regime will end up, though it's not like they will seek Good:

> Yes, I said, he lives from day to day indulging the appetite of the hour; and sometimes he is lapped in drink and strains of the flute; then he becomes a water-drinker, and tries to get thin; then he takes a turn at gymnastics; sometimes idling and neglecting everything, then once more living the life of a philosopher; often he is busy with politics, and starts to his feet and says and does whatever comes into his head; and, if he is emulous of any one who is a warrior, off he is in that direction, or of men of business, once more in that. His life has neither law nor order; and this distracted existence he terms joy and bliss and freedom; and so he goes on.

Finally, Socrates describes the tyrannical state, which Socrates believes can be formed from a democratic state when some people acquire too much power for the rest of the citizenry to hold them in check. Socrates does not directly describe the nature of a citizen of this society yet, but rather that of the tyrant himself. Someone who is constantly distrustful of everyone and hiding his true nature from everyone. Book VIII ends before the nature of a citizen's soul in this kind of regime is described.

Book IX: Justice versus Injustice

As Book IX starts, Socrates finishes up his description of the soul in a tyranny:

> [Socrates] When he has nothing left, must not his desires, crowding in the nest like young ravens, be crying aloud for food; and he, goaded on by them, and especially by love himself, who is in a manner the captain of them, is in a frenzy, and would fain discover whom he can defraud or despoil of his property, in order that he may gratify them?

[Glaucon] Yes, that is sure to be the case.

[Socrates] He must have money, no matter how, if he is to escape horrid pains and pangs.

[Glaucon] He must.

[Socrates] And as in himself there was a succession of pleasures, and the new got the better of the old and took away their rights, so he being younger will claim to have more than his father and his mother, and if he has spent his own share of the property, he will take a slice of theirs.

[Glaucon] No doubt he will.

[Socrates] And if his parents will not give way, then he will try first of all to cheat and deceive them.

After concluding his description of the tyrannical soul, Socrates then puts the question to Glaucon: Of all these types of souls, which person will be the happiest?

[Socrates] Come then, I said, and as the general umpire in theatrical contests proclaims the result, do you also decide who in your opinion is first in the scale of happiness, and who second, and in what order the others follow: there are five of them in all—they are the royal, timocratical, oligarchical, democratical, tyrannical.

[Glaucon] The decision will be easily given, he replied; they shall be choruses coming on the stage, and I must judge them in the order in which they enter, by the criterion of virtue and vice, happiness and misery.

[Socrates] Need we hire a herald, or shall I announce, that the son of Ariston (the best) has decided that the best and justest is also the happiest, and that this is he who is the most royal man and king over himself; and that the worst and most unjust man is also the most miserable, and that this is he who being the greatest tyrant of himself is also the greatest tyrant of his State?

Not content with just this example, Socrates offers another proof. He first distinguishes souls having three forms of desire: desire for wisdom, honor, and money. After carefully explaining the nature of these desires, Socrates leads the group to the conclusion that the lover of wisdom, because he will profit from his knowledge at a very early age and will never lose his wisdom, is the clear winner in this scenario.

Again, Socrates offers another proof by speculating on the nature of pleasure. Although relief from pain and sensual pleasure are certainly good, they are far more transient than the pleasure the soul feels when it obtains more knowledge. Socrates

feels that he has adequately stated the case for justice, and even manages to dissuade the argument that a pure unjust soul still won't profit as much as a normal just soul.

Book X: Loose Ends

The end of Book IX could almost end *Republic.* After all, the definition of justice has been found, and the profit value of justice versus injustice has also been proved. Plato seems to have some issues that he wants resolved before he closes the dialogue. In Books II and III, there were discussions on imitative poetry as something that could be used to educate the guardians of Callipolis.

Plato, through Socrates, seems to have some strong misgivings about imitative poetry. No matter how pure an artist's motives are, ultimately they're going to place their own perceptions and values within the work. Also, any poetry that imitates the negative aspects of life is not desired. These poems, Socrates believes, are a real danger; they can prevent the soul from achieving its full potential.

Socrates leaps from this point to the fact that the soul is, indeed, immortal, because we cannot understand its full nature. Because of this, the soul is not tied to a body and, therefore, must endure after the body is gone.

Using their definition of justice that he and his fellows have discovered, Socrates goes on to speculate what rewards and penalties might await us all. For if the soul is immortal, he reasons, then there will come a time when a reckoning will occur.

Socrates creates a particular picture of the afterlife he believes might await us, based on the notion of justice he has just helped the men reason. It is a pleasant tale of a thousand-year journey, which Socrates uses to end his lesson and the evening's conversation:

> And thus, Glaucon, the tale has been saved and has not perished, and will save us if we are obedient to the word spoken; and we shall pass safely over the river of Forgetfulness and our soul will not be defiled. Wherefore my counsel is that we hold fast ever to the heavenly way and follow after justice and virtue always, considering that the soul is immortal and able to endure every sort of good and every sort of evil. Thus shall we live dear to one another and to the gods, both while remaining here and when, like conquerors in the games who go round to gather gifts, we receive our reward. And it shall be well with us both in this life and in the pilgrimage of a thousand years which we have been describing.

Further Reading

Plato's Main Works

Apology
Charmides
Cratylus
Critias
Crito
Euthydemus
Euthyphro
Gorgias
Ion
Laches
The Laws
Lysis
Meno
Parmenides
Phaedo
Phaedrus
Philebus
Protagoras
Republic
The Seventh Letter
Sophist
Statesman
Symposium
Theaetetus
Timaeus

Collections, Biographies, and Critical Works

Plato. *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, and Phaedo,* 2nd ed. Trans. G. M. A. Grube and John M. Cooper. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 2002.

Plato. *Plato Complete Works.* Ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson. Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing, 1997.

Plato. *The Republic.* Ed. G. R. F. Ferrari. Trans. Tom Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Taylor, A. E. *Plato: The Man and His Work,* 4th ed. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2001.

Plato Web Sites

Life of Plato and Philosophical Influences by W. K. C. Guthrie. www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/ancient-greece/guthrie-plato.asp. — An excellent biographical site on Plato that gives visitors key insights into how Plato lived and how it affected his work. Contains downloadable Greek fonts for further research into original texts.

Plato and His Dialogues, University of Evansville. http://plato.evansville.edu. — A complete biographical and analytical site that translates many of Plato's major works.

Platonica by Christopher Planeaux. http://php.iupui.edu/~cplaneau/plato_03_30.htm. — A wonderful site that contains the work of one of the world's foremost Platonic scholars.

General Philosophy

EpistemeLinks.com: Philosophy Resources on the Internet. www.epistemelinks.com. — Includes more than 15,000 categorized links to philosophy resources on the Internet.

Erratic Impact's Philosophy Research Base. www.erraticimpact.com. — A research database that taps into online and text works, in many philosophical areas and genres.

The Internet Classics Archive. http://classics.mit.edu/index.html. — By far the best site to read virtually all of Plato's English translated works.

Philosophy Pages, by Garth Kemerling. www.philosophypages.com. — A broad general reference site that covers the history and development of Western philosophy.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta. http://plato.stanford.edu. — An online version of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* with entries on philosophers, philosophy movements, and philosophical concepts.

Thornburg, Thomas and Mary Thornburg. *CliffsNotes Plato's Republic.* New York: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2000.

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